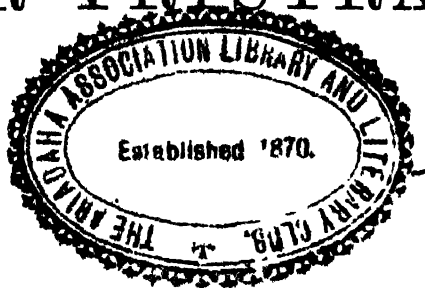


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# SIR TRISTRAM



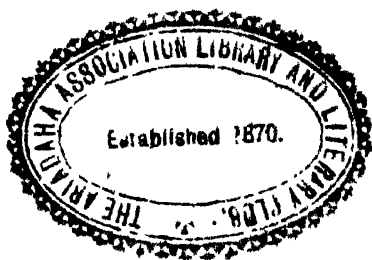
BY

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# SIR TRISTRAM

## CHAPTER I.

THE water had been rising all day. Since early morning, when the low gray clouds first swept across the sky, the west wind had echoed over the valley the moan of the distant sea. It scattered the rain across the fields, and lashed up the waves of the river into a seething fury till they rolled along, gathering up boughs and sticks and drifting boats and drowning animals in their mad career.

All day long a crowd of men and boys had stood upon the bridge that spanned the river as it flowed through the little town of Stowbury, and with ropes and poles had striven hard to keep the arches clear. Already the flood was creeping up the street, lapping with a strange sound against the houses, and trickling over door-stones on to cottage floors; if the wreckage should dam up the water, the whole riverside would be laid waste!

Now and again a shout arose as some strange object rushed down upon the stream, and loud yelps of terror were mingled with the voices of the men as a dog was swept into sight, perched on the roof of its floating kennel. With almost human pleading in its eyes it cried for help as it approached the bridge; but the current was too strong, ropes and poles were powerless to arrest it, and disappearing for a moment under the arch, it emerged on the other side and was soon but a floating speck in the distance.

And still the river rose!

Housewives were carrying their furniture upstairs, shopkeepers securing their stock, and old men and women

telling to eager listeners the tale of the last great flood, till at last twilight came down on the wild October day and the river thundered on through the darkness, more terrible because unseen.

Down below the town, where the meadows lay in a wide sloping tract of verdure, the water had fuller sway than it had above the bridge, and, as the day wore on, it had crept over the grass, first in narrow streams that mapped out islands as it went, but at last in a widening sea which, as night drew on, seethed and sobbed unceasingly.

A solitary house stood within sight of the town among the meadows, an old house with gabled roof and ivy-covered chimneys. Its garden walls were laden with ripening fruit in the summer time, and its borders were filled with sweet-smelling shrubs and flowers; a sheltered, silent place, where the sunlight lay still and warm, and the bees hummed an old-world song as they flew to and fro. But when wild winds were blowing and the floods were afield, the silence was invaded by unquiet spirits; footsteps echoed in the empty chambers and voices whispered along the galleries, while the gale rose and fell round the walls like an advancing and retreating army. •

On such a night as this one might have thought that the inhabitants of the solitary house would have been full of excitement and alarm, but, early as it was, the household had retired to bed, and the only member of it still awake had been sitting for the last half-hour in a train of thought so deep and abstracted that she had never once lifted her eyes from the glowing coals. The room in which she sat was a complete contrast to the rest of the house; the ancient furniture and faded tapestry that adorned the lower rooms were banished from this snug retreat, where engravings of modern pictures hung on the walls, and every available corner was filled with new editions of standard works. Bacon, Milton, Addison and Johnson were all present—but Johnson was denuded of his calf binding; and Addison bereft of his old-fashioned print; bound in cheap cloth covers, heralded by introductions and followed by notes, they looked as uncomfortable as if they had been living creatures ticketed for show in a museum.

A pile of dictionaries, concordances and commentaries stood on the writing table, where numberless volumes of essays were flanked by numberless short memoirs; a half-written sheet of paper lay on the desk, and the pen still in the inkstand told of recently-interrupted work.

The owner of books and pen was meanwhile resting in her easy chair; her bright brown hair shone with a touch of gold in the lamplight, and her eyes showed dark and deep under their heavy lashes. Her figure was slight and girlish, and her mouth, though firmly set, was marked by some indeterminate lines to be resolved as character and destiny should dictate. Hylda Carlyle wanted still a few months of twenty-one, an age when, whatever a girl's opinions and aspirations may be, her ultimate development is still an open question.

That Hylda's opinions and aspirations were not altogether of the ordinary kind was denied by no one who knew her; but while some admired there were others who condemned. It was unnatural, to say the least of it, that she should care so little for the advantages that she possessed, and should care so much for others that were out of her reach.

Mrs. Carlyle had had many things to try her in the course of her life, but nothing had ever tried her so sorely as the discovery that her daughter was not cast in the same mould as herself. She had been taught in her youth that it was her first duty to marry well, and when Captain Carlyle—handsome, rich, and the eldest son of a baronet—was thrown in her way, she required no urging to induce her to accept his proposals.

Her first grief had come in the shape of her baby boy's death a few weeks after he was born, and in scarcely more than a year the birth of a daughter had been followed by an accident in which Captain Carlyle lost his life.

To say that Mrs. Carlyle did not grieve for her husband would be untrue, she did grieve for him; but she grieved still more for the loss of the wealth and position that she had been taught to regard as the world's best gift. The property was strictly entailed, and on the death of the old baronet it passed to his younger son, while Mrs. Carlyle

and her daughter were left with a sufficient income and the use of the Manor House.

Most of the land round Stowbury was included in the Carlyle estates, and, do what she might, and go where she would, the widow could in no wise escape from the sight of farms and fields and forests that would have been her son's if he had lived. The bitterness of this feeling was accentuated by the relations between Lady Carlyle and herself. In Harriet's position, she thought, she would not have behaved as Harriet did; it was all very well to talk of bowing to the decrees of Providence, but since Providence had decreed Harriet's exaltation and her own abasement, the point was scarcely one for Harriet to insist upon! Still, the two ladies preserved an outward semblance of friendship, and when the young baronet died, leaving but one sickly son to keep the family honours from passing to a distant branch, Mrs. Carlyle's condolences were sincere as well as profuse.

Since that time, however, their friendship had passed through a still more serious crisis. Sir Tristram, debarred from many pleasures by his delicate health, had found consolation in the society of his cousin. They read together, rode together, walked and talked together, with the result that Tristram fell in love with her, to his aunt's unconcealed delight, and his mother's unconcealed disgust.

It was Mrs. Carlyle's turn now to talk of bowing to the decrees of Providence; there was such a thing as poetic justice in the world after all, and, since matters were arranging themselves according to her wishes it was easy to believe that they were ordered for the best.

The only bitter drop in the cup was that Hylda seemed to be strangely indifferent to her good fortune. She was fond of her cousin, and accepted his attentions good-temperedly enough, but any attempt to win a definite answer to his suit was met with a repulse, and for some time now the subject had been dropped, on the tacit understanding that the engagement would be announced as soon as Hylda came of age, at which time Sir Tristram would be twenty-five.

But though Tristram kept honourably to his promise of

silence, Mrs. Carlyle was not so scrupulous, and she lost no opportunity of impressing her wishes upon her daughter.

On this very evening she had harped on the subject continuously since dinner-time, until Hylda was thankful that a fit of indignant tears came to end her mother's arguments, and compelled her to seek refuge in an early retirement to bed.

"It has just ruined my evening's work!" said Hylda, impatiently, as she shut her study door and lit the reading-lamp on her table. "I had the whole thing in my mind an hour or two ago, but now I might just as well not have gone to the lecture at all!"

She sighed heavily as she opened a notebook and took out a University Extension syllabus from between its leaves. The subject was a sufficiently large one, "The Relation of Literature to Life," and the lecture to which she turned bore the appropriate title, "The Evolution of Revolt."

"The Germ of Freedom." "The workings of Freedom in the human mind." "The development of the idea of Freedom in the writings of the poets."

Such were some of the headings that seemed to her like water in a thirsty land. Here was appreciation, sympathy, and help, and her fingers touched the page caressingly as though it could understand her gratitude.

"I certainly have one thing to thank Tristram for," she thought, "if it had not been for him we should never have got these lectures established; and what a new world they have opened to me!"

"The Evolution of Revolt." There was something in the name that struck an answering chord in her breast, and, seizing pen and paper, she began to write.

Her train of thought was not, however, destined to be long uninterrupted. When the mind contains a subject of perpetual irritation, the slightest touch will serve to arouse it; a sentence in her notebook recalled one of her mother's recent speeches, and instantly the old vexed question rushed back upon her and blotted out her golden visions.

Freedom! That in one word was the object of her desires, and the object for which she had determined to live. But, as all the world knows, it is one thing to set



the mind upon an object and quite another to attain it. Freedom was Hylda's desire, and Freedom seemed to be eternally out of her reach.

She threw down her pen at last and went over to the fireside to think. Two courses of life lay open before her, and they seemed to her but different forms of bondage. On the one hand, she might remain as she was, stretch out after such little morsels of intellectual advancement as came in her way, and wait for future emancipation; or, on the other, she might marry Tristram and spend her life in a round of dull duties. Wealth and position, which in her mother's eyes were so all-important, seemed to her absolutely worthless. She had no craving for London Society, for the London that she knew was but the country transported to town for the season, with its conversation a little smarter and its dinner hour a little later. The world for which she longed was that cosmopolitan world of art and music and literature where all the men were delightful and all the women witty, and where life was lifted far above the narrow bounds in which she at present existed. This imaginary world was her Paradise; and, like the forbidden Peri, she lingered at the gate and longed to find an entrance. Should she be dooming herself to perpetual banishment if she married Tristram, or could she mould him to her will and compel him to open to her the new life for which she longed? This was the question that occupied her mind and prevented her from silencing him altogether; he was a dear fellow, and he loved her: might it not be possible to uproot him from the hole in which he had grown, and use the power that his position would give her in furthering her desires?

It might be possible, and therefore she had not given him a decided refusal, and yet there was a secret fear that held her back from a decided acceptance. In spite of his slender frame and delicate health—in spite, even, of his devotion to herself—there was a latent force in her cousin's character that warned her that he could not be treated as a puppet. She played with him and teased him; there were times when she even despised him for his want of comprehension of her views, yet all the while she was conscious

of a secret strength in him against which she measured herself in vain.

No; the risk was too great. If Tristram considered it his wife's duty to spend her life in patronising philanthropic societies and returning the calls of the county, he was quite capable of making her do it, to the ruin of all her private aspirations. It would be wiser, after all, to nurse her wings and muse on immortality until her restrictions were removed and she could try a flight on her own account. She would publish her volume of essays under a pseudonym, and then flash forth before the eyes of her friends in all the glory of her fame, and claim her right to live a life of her own.

There was only one drawback to this bright scheme for the future; it was not such an easy matter to bring her essays before the eyes of the world as she had imagined that it would be. Her allowance was no more than enough for her needs, and, as the secret must be strictly preserved, she could not ask her mother for money for the production of the book; the only plan, therefore, was to induce some publisher to bring it out at his own risk, and this, strangely enough, no publisher had as yet been found ready to do. "Hours of Insight," as she had named her book, had gone the weary round that so many manuscripts go, and no one had yet recognised the glow of latent genius within its pages.

It is not easy to discourage young writers, as many publishers know to their cost, and Hylda, far from being downcast by her repeated failures, was merely indignant. It was not her book that was lacking, but that influential friend, existent in the imagination of so many budding authors, who is ready to take talent by the hand and introduce it to fame! An adviser was what Hylda longed for, as the solution of the difficulties of her case; but where to find what she wanted was another thing. The town of Stowbury was small and its inhabitants old fashioned, there were none among them who took any interest in literary matters, and Hylda went vainly through the list of her acquaintances.

But this autumn had witnessed a new departure in the

neighbourhood. An energetic lady had taken up the direction of the ladies' school in the town, and finding things intellectual at the lowest ebb of stagnation, she bethought herself of calling in the aid of University Extension. Her task was an uphill one, for the movement was too modern to meet with much approbation; but not being easily daunted she persevered, and on asking Sir Tristram Carlyle to allow his name to be printed as President of the Centre, she received such a handsome donation that she was able to complete her arrangements.

Hylda had naturally taken the keenest interest in the matter, and had gone to the first lecture with expectations that seemed too glowing for fulfilment; yet, glowing as they were, they were not only fulfilled but surpassed. Mr. Richard Weston was a man such as at present she had only dreamed of; he had penetrating eyes, a commanding appearance and a fine voice; but more than this, the vague ideas that had floated before her for so long seemed familiar realities to him; and, as she listened to his flowing utterances, she felt as if all her doubts and perplexities were being suddenly cleared away like shadows at sunrise.

What would not an hour's talk with him be to her! She watched Miss Elton with admiring envy as she carried him off to tea. Why should she be shut out from privileges that would have been so precious to her? But her feelings had become intensified a hundredfold on this second afternoon, when on taking back her corrected paper at the end of the lecture, she found a blue pencil scrawl on the outer sheet. "A very intelligent essay, but you do not give enough references in support of your opinions."

Again and again she pondered over the sentence. He had recognised her powers, and, if she could only get speech with him, she would tell him of those hidden conflicts which seemed to her as fully qualified to support her opinions as any statements of poets or prose writers. He would understand her, sympathise with her, and help her; perhaps she might even summon up courage to show him the manuscript of her essays, and her fancy ran rapidly forward and pictured various scenes of introduction, equally delightful and equally improbable.

rising rapidly, the staircase was becoming engulfed step by step, and though they could seek refuge in the attics if it rose to the gallery, they might all be dead of cold and hunger before help came to them.

It was no time to show her fear, however, and, carrying the provisions she had secured into her own room, she turned the key in the door; if their siege was to be a long one they could not be too careful at the beginning.

The scene, as she looked over the rails of the gallery, was a strange one: cloaks, shawls, and umbrellas were tossing restlessly on the waves beneath, chairs were drifting hither and thither, and even the heavy oak table was afloat. And still the flood poured remorselessly in till the weight of water broke open the drawing-room door, and by the dim light of her lamp Hylda could see it making havoc of her mother's cherished possessions.

Mrs. Carlyle had subsided into a state of silent despair, and, following her example, the maids crouched together with pale faces and terrified looks. Hylda preferred their present condition to their former one, but her own alarm grew more acute as theirs became more passive, and she watched the rising tide with anxious eyes. It was not more than eleven o'clock, though the time seemed so long that she could scarcely believe that her clock told the truth, when a knocking was distinctly heard above the noise of the water.

"What's that?" cried one or two, roused from their stupor by the fresh sound.

"It's spirits come to warn us!" exclaimed Nelson, her voice shaking with fear. "I know there's water witches that ride on the floods, and when I first looked out I see —"

"That will do!" said Hylda, decisively. "I am going to the other side of the house to look out at one of the windows. Roberts, you had better come with me."

"Oh! don't go, my dear young lady!" sobbed Nelson. "They say that whoever sees the witches first dies before the year's out. That's why I shut my eyes and screamed as hard as I could when I went to the window."

She held her young mistress's dress in a convulsive

clasp, but Hylda drew it away without replying, and passing round the gallery went into one of the rooms on the opposite side. The knocking was much louder here, and, even if she had shared Nelson's fears, they would have been speedily allayed by the cheerful sound of voices.

"They must all be asleep," were the words that greeted her ears as she threw up the window and leaned out.

A boat was underneath, lifted high on the rising water; a lantern tied to a pole shed its lurid light on the figures of two or three men, but Hylda could not distinguish their faces.

"Is that you, miss?" said a voice that she recognised as the gardenér's.

"Yes, we are all upstairs. I am so thankful you have come, Jennings. Where did you get a boat?"

"It's the boat from the 'Black Eagle,' at Stowbury, miss. They thought we should be in need of help, and rowed over. They stopped at the lodge first, and took my wife and children to the rooms over the stables, and then came on here."

"What had we better do?" asked Hylda, who began to feel her strength failing now that help had come. "The water is in the house, and it is rising fast."

"If you could let yourselves down to the boat, we might row you round to the stables, two or three at a time," said Jennings. "What do you say, William?" and he turned to one of the men from the "Black Eagle," who was a nephew of his.

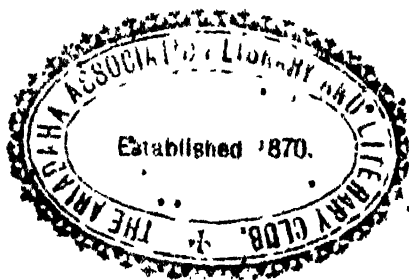
"It 'ud be a hard matter to get them in safely from the window," said William, after some little reflection. "If the water's inside, the boat had better go inside after it."

"Oh, yes!" cried Hylda, who had been wondering how her mother could ever be induced to let herself be lowered into the darkness; "please do that if you can. It is the furthest hall window that has given way."

She ran back with renewed courage, and the servants, who were quite in good spirits by this time, began to light lamps under her directions, and place them near the railings so as to throw their light into the hall below. In a few seconds a dark object appeared at the window, and

Jennings, pocket-knife in hand, cut and broke away the remainder of the framework. Then bringing the boat's head to the opening, they shipped their oars and bent their heads, and in another moment she shot in, and was brought to anchor in the hall.

A cheer broke from the group of spectators, for though they were none of them able to appreciate the skill with which the manœuvre had been executed, they were all wrought to the highest pitch of excitement by the appearance of their rescuers. Hylda was the only silent one among them; it was not indifference, however, that sealed her lips, but a sudden intensity of feeling. Up to the present moment their experience had been nothing but a shivering misery, but now it was changed into a drama of keen and soul-stirring interest; for the figure in the boat, with well-knit sinewy frame, and dark piercing eyes that looked searchingly into her own, was none other than the one man in all the world whom she longed to see—Mr. Richard Weston, the University Extension lecturer!



## CHAPTER II.

How long Hyldå Carlyle kept her station by the old oak rail of the gallery she never knew. In reality it was not more than a few moments; but yet, in that brief space, she had time to take in every detail of the figure beneath her gaze. She noticed the easy poise of his head, the clustering dark hair, the strong hand that rested on the oar, and the penetrating glance with which he looked around him. She had imagined a thousand meetings, but not one had been so romantic nor so satisfying as this; winds and waters had swept him to her feet, just when it appeared most unlikely that they should come together, and the whole of the night's adventures seemed nothing now but an appropriate setting for their introduction.

Mr. Weston was the first to speak. "This is a very unceremonious entry," he said, looking up with a smile, "and I feel that I owe you an apology; but as I am a good oar I could not resist joining the party when I heard of a possible rescue."

"We are only too much obliged to you," said Hylda, waking up as if from a dream, at the sound of his voice. "I had begun to be afraid that no help would come to us till morning."

"The only thing now is to make up our minds what to do," he went on; "I don't know how we are to get you all out to the stables, and it seems to me that for the present you are best where you are. I had plenty of provisions put into the boat so that you will not be in any danger of starving."

"Let us stay where we are, if possible," exclaimed

Mrs. Carlyle, in a tone of piteous entreaty, as she watched the boat rocking to and fro on the tide.

"I think that it will really be the safest plan," said Mr. Weston; "but it will not do to leave you here alone. The boat will have to go back to the other lodge, as it is almost under water, but I shall stay here, and if the flood goes on rising I will make signals for the boat to be brought. What do you say?" and he turned to Jennings.

"That will do well!" said Jennings, with much relief, for he had been dreading the idea of having to convey his mistress and a cargo of maids on such a dangerous expedition. "There's a turret window that we can see from the stables, and if you put a lamp in it we shall know that you want the boat. But the wind has sunk, and I don't think that the water will come up any higher."

"Bring the boat up to the staircase, then," said Mr. Weston, and, seizing the bannisters, he swung himself over. "Can you pull out safely?" he added, as he took the basket that Jennings handed up.

"Ay, ay, sir," said William, "I can manage her," and with much splashing and shouting the exit was accomplished, and the boat disappeared into the darkness.

"The first thing to be done is to give you all something to eat," said Mr. Weston, turning towards Hylda, "Is there a room with a fire in it?"

"Yes, the fire is still alight in my sitting room," said Hylda, falling under his command with a sense of quiet satisfaction.

She watched him admiringly as he took the direction of the little garrison, dealing out the rations, and keeping up everyone's spirits with his cheerful remarks.

Mrs. Carlyle was soon established comfortably upon the sofa, while several of the maids were so reassured by his presence that they returned to bed.

"You must take something yourself," said Hylda, as he came back from a tour of inspection and began to make up the fire.

"I don't want anything, thank you. I had dinner just before we started."

"Yes, but think of all that you have done since! You



must take this coffee ; I have been making it specially for you."

Hylda had never been freer from embarrassment than she was at the present moment, for the romance of the situation for her lay entirely in the strange fulfilment of her desire for an opportunity of seeking Mr. Weston's counsel. What Mr. Weston's views on the matter might be did not appear ; he took the coffee from her hand and sat down in the chair that she placed for him, but, though the look on his face betokened that he was very well pleased with the situation in which he found himself, he did not express it in words.

"I do not think that my nerves will ever recover from this night's shock!" said Mrs. Carlyle, plaintively, from her sofa. "My daughter is of such a different constitution that she can scarcely sympathise with me. I often tell her that she is spared a great deal; it must be an immense comfort to have feelings that can be so easily controlled."

"It is a fortunate thing in times of danger!" remarked Mr. Weston.

"Oh, yes, of course. I don't know what I should do without her in that way. I am so yielding myself that perhaps it is a good thing for me to have a daughter who is firm and determined."

"If you have finished your coffee, will you come and see if the water has risen?" said Hylda. Her mother's words had vexed her sorely, and she would not risk any further confidences.

She went out into the gallery, and Mr. Weston followed her with a smile curling his lip ; he saw through her innocent device, but he did not wonder that she was anxious to put a stop to her mother's remarks.

He came up to the railing where she stood and leaned over in silence. The chilly wind blew in through the wide window frame, and the flickering lamps cast strange lights and shadows over the scene. All was still, except for the lapping of the water on the stairs.

"It has not risen any higher," said Mr. Weston, after a pause ; "there were eight steps uncovered when I looked last, and there are eight still."

"How soon will it begin to go down?"

"I can't tell you exactly, but if there is no more rain and the wind does not rise, you will see a great difference by the morning. I had some experience of floods at college."

"I wish that I could go to college!" exclaimed Hylda, the word striking suddenly upon an old train of desire.

"Well, why should you not go? Plenty of young ladies do nowadays."

"Oh! yes, I know that; but my mother would never allow it."

"Even though she is so yielding and you are so determined!"

The speech did not strike Hylda as impertinent, and she smiled in answer. Her smile was a very attractive one, and Mr. Weston looked at her approvingly.

"I asked Miss Elton about you after the lecture this afternoon," he said, "for I was much struck by some of the remarks in your paper."

A glow of delight rushed over Hilda's face; this was the recognition she had longed for, and having longed for it so often, it did not surprise her when it came.

"Your lectures have been such a treat to me," she said; "I cannot tell you how I was longing for something of the kind. This is such a dead-alive place, and when we go to London we have no time for lectures; or, at least, my mother says that we have no time, which comes to the same thing."

She smiled again, and Mr. Weston laughed with an agreeable sense of novelty; there was something in the whole situation that gratified him extremely.

"I wanted very much to speak to you this afternoon," she said, "but I could not summon up courage."

"Well, speak to me now," he said, playfully, turning a little, so as to lean one elbow on the railing, and get a better view of her face.

"I don't know whether I can," began Hylda, but at this moment her mother's voice was heard in the distance, and she started up hastily.

"We must go back," she said.

Mr. Weston felt more irritated than he had expected, and strolled after her with his hands in his pockets and a discontented expression upon his face.

Hylda was standing by the sofa, holding a fan in one hand, and a smelling-bottle in the other.

"You should not have been so inconsiderate as to leave me," said Mrs. Carlyle in a faint voice.

"Would you like to go to bed now?" said Mr. Weston, coming up to the sofa. "I will keep watch; but there is really no danger, for the water is not rising."

"Oh, no, I could not possibly go to bed; it might begin to rise again at any moment, and I must be ready to fly."

Mr. Weston did not argue the point. He knew that her fears were groundless, but that only made them more difficult to combat; he took up a book, therefore, and sat down, leaving Hylda to administer such consolation as lay in her power.

Hylda glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece as she resumed her fanning. It was long past midnight, and she felt a gathering annoyance as she saw how the precious hours were slipping away; such an opportunity might never return, and now that it was within her grasp she was unable to take advantage of it! But gradually her mother's eyelids began to droop, and before another ten minutes had passed she had fallen into a peaceful sleep.

Hylda laid down the fan and smelling-bottle, and drawing a chair to the fire, she sat down and looked thoughtfully into its glow. Now that the time had come it was not so easy to speak as she had imagined that it would be; but Mr. Weston seemed to anticipate her thoughts, for, lifting his eyes from his book, he said quietly, "When you wrote in your essay that Freedom was but a name to some people all their life long, were you speaking from experience, or only from imagination?"

"Partly from my own experience," said Hylda, answering him as though he had been her father confessor; "but it might have been just as true, might it not, if I had only spoken from imagination?"

"Certainly! What we call imagination is often only an instinctive conception of facts outside our knowledge.

But as to your own experience, you could not prove the truth of such a remark unless you were looking back upon your life from its close."

"I only meant that I had not found Freedom up to the present time."

"So I supposed. Was that what you wanted to speak to me about?"

Hylda's cheek flushed, not from any self-consciousness, but from the excitement of uttering her thoughts to a sympathetic listener; even Tristram, much as she knew that he loved her, did not understand her like this stranger!

"Perhaps you will wonder at my talking to you in this way," she said, raising her eyes to his, "but directly I heard you speak I knew that you would be able to help me. Ever since I can remember I have longed to write books and to meet people who wrote books, but I have always had things to hinder me."

"Have you ever tried to write?"

"Oh, yes; I have written a great deal, but I have never had anything published yet."

Mr. Weston had listened to the same tale many times in his life, but it interested him to-night as it had never done before. There was something in his strange surroundings and in the childlike beauty of the face opposite to him, that made him unconscious of the boredom that he generally experienced when such aspirations were poured into his ears.

"I could not express any opinion without seeing your work," he said. "Would you have any objection to showing it to me?"

"Oh, no! I am only longing for someone to see it whose judgment I can really trust; you do not know what it is to live with people who cannot share in one's inner life."

"Do I not!" he said, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

Hylda looked at him with some curiosity; if she were in his position, she thought, possessed of a vigorous mind, well-educated and successful in a chosen career, she should not need to sigh over the limitations of her lot. But perhaps he had an unsympathetic wife, and her ready

*fancy* pictured the trials of a literary man compelled to pass his days in the company of a woman who had no ideas beyond her household duties.

She started when Mr. Weston spoke again, as though she feared that he had read her thoughts, but his words recalled her to their former subject of conversation.

"If you will trust me with one of your manuscripts I will take it away with me," he said. "An opinion is worth nothing unless it is carefully formed."

"But that will be a trouble to you," said Hylda; "could you not just look at it now?"

"No, I could not give my whole thoughts to it here," said Mr. Weston. The remark was true enough, but another reason lay underneath, namely, that as he expected the manuscript to be trash it would be awkward to read it with the writer's eyes fixed eagerly upon him, waiting for his verdict.

"I have not seen Sir Tristram Carlyle yet," he said, by way of changing the subject. "His name is put down as President of the Centre, but I suppose he does not mean to attend the lectures?"

"Yes, I think he will, but he has been abroad, and only came home yesterday."

"Is he interested in literature?"

"He is very fond of reading, but his health has been so delicate that he has not been able to work much. He had a tutor, as he was not strong enough to go to school."

"That is the kind of training that always has a bad effect on a man," remarked Mr. Weston, "unless he is very exceptional, that is to say; but perhaps your cousin is exceptional?"

"Oh! no, he is not exceptional in any way," said Hylda, smiling at the idea; "he is very nice and kind, but nothing more. I can't understand why he did not send somebody to our rescue to-night, by the way; for all he could tell, we might have been drowning."

She looked at her companion with shy gratitude as she spoke, and Mr. Weston felt a flattering sense of pleasure. All men like to be considered heroes, but to buy that consideration at a cheap rate is to some men a satisfaction

and to others a vexation, according to their make of mind.

He had just opened his lips to reply when Mrs. Carlyle stirred uneasily, and looked about her.

"I had quite forgotten where I was," she said, after a moment's bewilderment. "I am so fearfully tired and stiff! Do you think it would be safe for us to go to bed now?"

"Quite," said Mr. Weston, who, though he had been enjoying the conversation, felt some desire for slumber himself. "I will promise to call you if there is the least danger."

Hylda was too excited to feel any wish for sleep, but she could not raise any objection, and as soon as she had seen her mother into bed she lay down on the couch in her room and gave herself up to thought; while Mr. Weston, having satisfied himself by another inspection that there was no danger of the water rising any higher, threw himself down on a convenient sofa and went unromantically to sleep.

It was late when he woke next morning, and he sprang up with a start, wondering where he was. No one was moving in the house, for the maids were all sleeping heavily after their excitement, and Hylda herself had dropped into a dreamless slumber as the light began to dawn.

He walked out into the gallery, and looked over at the water. The weather had changed in the night, the wind had shifted, and the sun was shining from a clear sky; the flood had already begun to go down, for more of the stairs were uncovered and there was a dark line round the wall above the level of the water. He looked at his watch and found that it was nearly ten o'clock, and, as he wondered what he should do, he caught sight of Roberts through a half-open door, sleeping soundly in an armchair.

"We may as well get breakfast ready before the ladies appear," he said, when, after some unsuccessful efforts, he had succeeded in waking him.

"We can't get down to the breakfast-room," said Roberts, helplessly.

Once put out of his ordinary groove the butler was as powerless as a stranded fish, and Mr. Weston saw that if any breakfast was forthcoming it would be entirely owing to his own exertions.

"Can you light fires?" he asked.

"No, sir; that is the housemaid's duty."

"Nor make coffee, I suppose? I thought not. Well, you can clear Miss Carlyle's writing-table while I do the rest."

Roberts stared at him in blank amazement.

"It's as much as my place is worth to touch Miss Carlyle's papers!" he said.

"Very well," said Mr. Weston, "I will take care of the ladies. As soon as the maids wake you can tell them to get your breakfast ready, and in the meantime I will only ask you to lend me a razor."

Roberts withdrew, his disapproval of this unceremonious stranger somewhat tempered by his relief at having the responsibility taken off his hands. Left to his own devices, Mr. Weston speedily kindled a fire and set on the kettle, then, piling away Hylda's papers and books with a rapid but careful hand, he arranged the provisions that remained from their last night's meal in the ornamental cups and plates that adorned the room.

"If she is vexed I have no knowledge of women," he remarked to himself, as he finished his preparations; and so saying he retired to the room where Roberts had placed a few toilet requisites, to make himself presentable.

He had hardly returned when a step was heard in the gallery, and Hylda appeared at the door.

"How good of you to get the breakfast ready!" she exclaimed, "my mother will be here directly."

"The butler warned me that you would be extremely annoyed at my touching your papers!" he said, looking down at her with a calm certainty of what her answer would be.

Her answer was nothing but a smile, but it conveyed all that he had expected, and he watched her with a look of new appreciation. Her curling hair lay lightly on her forehead, her rosy lips were parted with a smile, and when

she turned to speak to him her eyes shone so brightly that he was almost dazzled. He was accustomed to analyse his feelings, and he recognised at once that something new had entered into his life; his twenty-nine years had been marked by much success but by little enthusiasm, and he hardly knew what to make of this sudden quickening of his pulses.

Anything that he might have said was checked, however, by Mrs. Carlyle's entrance, and again he felt an unwonted annoyance at the interruption. She looked pale and worn after her night of agitation, as complete a contrast to her daughter as could well be imagined, and his eye travelled critically from one to the other even while he was making his enquiries after her health.

"I am terribly shaken!" she said, letting her hand fall limply from his grasp, "in fact, I feel quite shattered, and I shall have to go away for change before I recover from the shock."

Hylda looked up in alarm; to go away just now would be the upheaval of all her plans. There were few things she disliked more than being dragged through the dull routine of existence at Bath or Cheltenham that her mother so delighted in, but to be doomed to it just when her life at home had become so supremely interesting would be more than she could possibly endure.

"I don't think you are well enough to take a journey," she said hastily, "we had better go to the Court while the house is put to rights."

"I am not sure that I care to go to the Court," said Mrs. Carlyle, "it is very remiss of Tristram not to have sent over to see what was happening to us."

"I expect he had more than enough to do at home," said Hylda, resenting the very remark from her mother that she had previously made herself.

"Very likely," said Mrs. Carlyle, who was always delighted when her daughter said anything in Tristram's favour, "but your aunt might at least have sent someone with an invitation by this time, if she wished us to make use of her house."

"The people who have the most servants generally find



the most difficulty in getting things done," remarked Mr. Weston, who had been listening to the conversation with some amusement.

Hylda smiled, but Mrs. Carlyle drew herself up with an air of displeasure. She was grateful to this stranger for his opportune help, but he was not to imagine that they were going to make a friend of him in consequence, and she blamed herself for having spoken of her private affairs before him.

"What part of the country do you come from?" she said, ignoring his remark.

"I have rooms in London," he replied, "but my home is at Yarmouth."

"At Yarmouth?" said Mrs. Carlyle, with an imperceptible shudder. "You mean that your people have a place near there, I suppose. Lord Garrelford has a place somewhere near Yarmouth, you remember, Hylda; but I don't think that people live in the town itself!"

"I have seen Lord Garrelford's place," said Mr. Weston, passing by the rest of her sentence. "I saw it when I was on the Broads one summer with some friends. I suppose you have been on the Broads? Most people go nowadays."

"Oh, dear no!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlyle; "it is not at all the kind of thing for ladies. One has to go through all sorts of unpleasant experiences, I believe; I should never go myself nor allow my daughter to do so."

She turned to look out of the window as though to put an end to the conversation, and Mr. Weston took advantage of her movement to exchange a look of amusement with Hylda. He knew very well that he was taking a liberty, but she did not seem to resent his behaviour, so why should he not reap the full enjoyment of the hour?

But though he had no fears so far as Hylda was concerned, he knew that if he ever wished to enjoy such an hour again he must be careful to propitiate her mother; and rising from his seat he assumed a serious air, as though taking up the burden of life again after a pleasant oasis.

"I shall soon be obliged to leave you," he said; "but before I go I had better see what the water is doing."

"Oh! but you must not think of leaving us at present," cried Mrs. Carlyle, her cordiality returning in a moment.

Mr. Weston could have smiled at the success of his ruse, but he managed to retain his gravity unmoved.

"I must somehow get back to London to-night," he said, "but I will not leave you just yet. I wonder if there is such a thing as a pair of wading-boots in the house," he added. "I believe that the water has gone down enough to let me get across the hall, and if so, I might rescue some of your things."

"I will ask Roberts," said Hylda; "I think that very likely he may have some."

Roberts, on being applied to, produced the boots with alacrity—only too glad to be spared the job himself—and having put them on, Mr. Weston made his way down to the hall, and splashed across to the drawing-room.

"Take care you don't hurt yourself!" cried Hylda, who was watching him from above.

"I'm all right," he said, looking back at her with a smile. "If you can find a large basket, and lower it over the rails, I will put the ornaments into it; they will all be spoilt if they stay here."

Hylda went off to carry out his directions, and several cargoes of half-drowned treasures had been deposited in the basket, when, with a furious dashing and splashing, a high dogcart drove up to the house, and stopped at the broken window.

"There is my cousin!" exclaimed Hylda.

Mr. Weston turned, and saw a pale-faced young man, whose look of anxiety was mingled with surprise. Sir Tristram had imagined all kinds of catastrophes that might have befallen the inhabitants of the Manor, but he had certainly not expected to see a stranger wading about the hall as though he were perfectly at home, exchanging jests and smiles with Miss Carlyle.

Mr. Weston was standing under the gallery when the dogcart drove up, his arms full of sofa-cushions and china

jars, and Hylda was letting down the basket with a look that told how much she enjoyed the adventure.

The picture dissolved itself in a moment, however. Hylda resigned the basket to Roberts, and went off to tell her mother that Tristram had arrived, while the stranger, having got rid of his load, waded across to the window.

"Sir Tristram Carlyle, I believe?" he said. "I am Mr. Weston, of whom you have probably heard. I was staying at the 'Black Eagle' last evening, and hearing that a boat was coming to the rescue of Mrs. Carlyle and her daughter, I took leave to join the party, and I hope that I have been of some little use to them."

Sir Tristram did not reply for a moment; he was vexed at having arrived only to find another in possession of the honours of war, but, further than this, there were one or two things in the speech that jarred upon his ear. It was scarcely good breeding, he thought, for a man to be so ready with the names of ladies who were practically unknown to him, and it was certainly not good breeding to speak in praise of his own achievements. But he checked himself with the reflection that he was hypercritical, and made some polite acknowledgment on his aunt's behalf.

"I was only too glad to be of use," said Mr. Weston, waving off his thanks; "but now, how are you going to get in, for I suppose you wish to come in?"

"Certainly I wish to come in," said the other, his irritation returning. "I can wade as far as the staircase; I am not afraid of wetting my feet."

If this remark was directed at Mr. Weston's fishing-boots, it failed in its aim; he made no answer, but as Sir Tristram stood up in the cart, he measured him with his eye, and saw that he was several inches shorter than himself.

"It is too deep for you," he said, and before Sir Tristram knew what he was doing he had put his arms about him as he stood on the window-sill, and lifting him as lightly as if he were a baby, carried him to the staircase.

The young baronet's annoyance sent the blood into his pale face, but even if he had not been helpless in the

other's powerful grasp it would have been too undignified to struggle.

"I am much obliged to you," he said, when he was set down, forcing himself to speak all the more politely because of the smile on his cousin's face as she returned with her mother.

Mrs. Carlyle generally treated her nephew with the utmost warmth, but she had hardly yet recovered her composure, and she greeted him with a querulousness to which he was quite unused.

"So you have come at last," she said. "I thought that you were going to leave us to our fate altogether. If it had not been for Mr. Weston we should all have been drowned by this time."

Each of her hearers knew perfectly well that this was an exaggeration, and yet both Mr. Weston and Hylda heard it with secret pleasure, while Sir Tristram listened with an annoyance that he could hardly conceal.

"I only returned home early this morning," he said, coldly, "for I missed my train last night. I drove over here as soon as I could get away."

Mrs. Carlyle was mollified by this explanation, but she did not choose to show it.

"It will be a wonder if I survive this night," she said, hugging herself closer in her shawl; "the house is filled with damp."

There was more truth in this speech than in the last, for the wind was blowing in through the broken window, and the chill of the water seemed to fill the whole atmosphere of the house.

"Yes, it is very cold," said Sir Tristram. "You ought to have a shawl on too," he added, looking at Hylda.

"Oh no, thank you, I never take cold," said Hylda.

Mr. Weston, who had been leaning over the railing, walked away along the gallery at this moment; and relieved of his presence, Sir Tristram announced his intention of taking his aunt and cousin back with him.

"But, my dear, I could never get into that cart!" said Mrs. Carlyle, looking with much trepidation at the powerful

horse that evinced the dislike of its surroundings by plunges that the groom could hardly restrain.

"Nothing else could have come through the water," said Tristram, "but you will be quite safe, I assure you. It would not be right for you to stay here, Aunt Cecilia; besides, you know what a pleasure it will be to my mother and me to have you at the Court."

Mrs. Carlyle was not quite so sure that it would be a pleasure to her sister-in-law, but this only added to her wish to go; it was very sweet to feel that Harriet was obliged to welcome them whether she liked it or no, and she accepted the invitation with alacrity.

"Hylde was saying only this morning that she wished you would ask us," she added.

Sir Tristram looked at his cousin, a sudden light dawning in his quiet grey eyes. Hylde usually fought shy of staying at the Court, for it seemed to her too much like an acknowledgment of a position to which she did not wish to pledge herself; that she should actually have proposed such a thing was to him as surprising as it was delightful, and instantly a fairy castle began to rise in the air, the slight foundations of which would soon have been destroyed if he had known the reason that prompted her remark.

But although the reason was hidden from him, his exaltation was, after all, short-lived; before the light had faded from his face Mr. Weston re-appeared, and in his hand he carried a shawl.

"How did you know where to find it?" asked Hylde in a low voice, as she received it submissively.

"You forget that I cleared your study for breakfast this morning," he answered.

Their eyes met, and Tristram saw the glance that passed between them; his heart stood still for a moment, but more with indignation than alarm. Hylde's possessions were well-nigh as sacred to him as she was herself, and that this stranger should presume to enter her study and ransack its contents seemed to him so astounding that he could scarcely believe he had heard aright. He looked at Mrs. Carlyle, but she was too much occupied with her own sensations to take any heed of what was passing

around her, and his only resource was to urge the ladies to hurry their departure.

"But we cannot go off and leave the house like this!" said Hylda.

"Oh yes, we can," said Mrs. Carlyle, who was only anxious to escape from the general chilliness around her. "Roberts will see to everything; your cousin will arrange it with him while we go and put our things together."

She hastened away to her room, and Hylda was obliged to follow, much against her will; it was too tantalising to be dragged away like this before she had finished what she wanted to say to Mr. Weston, and without being able to give him her precious manuscript. She did not even know how he was going to get back to Stowbury; it was very rude and ungrateful of Tristram to treat him in such a fashion.

Tristram, however, was not so unmindful of his manners as she supposed him to be. Even if Mr. Weston was not a very polished gentleman, he had done his best to, help in the emergency, and his services ought to be acknowledged. Hylda was gratified when she returned to find that her cousin was asking him to stay at the Court on the occasion of his next lecture, and she registered a secret vow that her visit should not end until after that date.

"We will stop at the stables and send the boat back for you," said Sir Tristram, as they shook hands.

"Thank you," returned the other; "but we must not say good-bye quite so soon; you cannot get back to the cart without my help."

Sir Tristram bit his lip with vexation, but it was useless to demur; he could not deny that the water was too deep for him, and to protest would be to make himself ridiculous. But though he was ready to submit to the humiliation for himself, he had no idea of subjecting his aunt and cousin to it, and on reaching the dogcart he took the reins and ordered his groom to fetch the ladies.

The groom looked down at his spotless cords and top boots with heartfelt dismay, and before he had made up his mind to jump down, Mr. Weston was back on the staircase and had taken Mrs. Carlyle in his arms.

The journey was not an easy one, for Mrs. Carlyle was heavy and her alarm found vent in shrieks and struggles that threatened a dire catastrophe. Even when the window was reached the danger was not over, for it was a difficult matter to lift her into the cart, and, excited by the confusion, the horse plunged more madly than ever. Both master and man had almost more than they could do to get her seated, and by the time her fears were a little allayed Mr. Weston had reached the staircase again and was returning with Hylda in his arms.

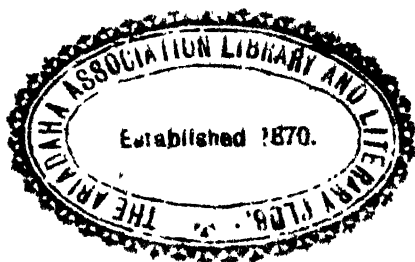
Tristram turned his head away, he could not watch what was so revolting to his feelings; and happily for him their words were too low to reach his ear.

"I shall see you on Thursday week," said Mr. Weston, "but you have not given me your manuscript."

"I got it out," said Hylda, "but then I thought that it would be a trouble to you in the boat."

"No; I want to have it. I shall go and look in your study for it as soon as you are gone."

And Hylda did not forbid him.



### CHAPTER III.

SIR TRISTRAM CARLYLE came of a long line of ancestors, and though he could not be called a fine-looking man, he preserved some of the characteristics of his race. With his pale face and peaked brown beard, he greatly resembled the portrait of Sir Guy Carlyle, the cavalier of Charles' court, who had lost his life on Marston Moor. There was a grace in his movements and a distinction in his bearing that recalled the days of lace ruffles and silver-stringed lutes, and yet no one could have been further removed from effeminacy. He was a good man of business, and his tenants respected him as one who was true and just in all his dealings; he ruled his estate as conscientiously as though it were an empire, and was both a diligent magistrate and a popular neighbour.

His conscientiousness he inherited from his mother, but not his grace and distinction. Lady Carlyle was one of those people who are saved much mental wear and tear by the fact that they are unable to see more than one side of a question. She had no doubts and conflicts, for she had never yet come across any subject that seemed to her to admit of discussion; as for facts, either they were or they were not; and as for opinions, if they coincided with her own they were right, and if they did not they were wrong. She had done her best to bring her son up in the same narrow groove, and the ill-health that had in some ways been so sore a disappointment to her, had in others been a secret source of comfort. If Tristram was unable to leave home, she would have all the more opportunity of impressing her own ideas upon his mind; but yet, dutiful and



affectionate as he was, there were limitations to her power over him that she speedily discovered. From his very childhood he had claimed the right to think for himself, and, to her dismay and alarm, he refused to accept her authority in matters of opinion.

But though the mother and son were not congenial in all things, they managed to live together in peace. Lady Carlyle acknowledged Tristram's position as master of the house, and Tristram showed to her much filial deference. It was not until he avowed his love for his cousin that any serious cause of dissension arose between them; for her sister-in-law she had a contempt that she called by the name of pity, but for her niece she had a dislike for which she attempted no disguise. She objected to Hylda's appearance, ideas, manners, and ways altogether.

The thoughts and feelings that Hylda delighted in were to her aunt simply "unladylike"; a young woman in her position had no business to write, far less to dream of publishing; and as for her talk of liberty, it was more shocking than Lady Carlyle could say. The prospect of such a girl becoming her son's wife filled her with horror unspeakable. The only comfort was that she would have to renounce all her old pursuits as soon as that event took place.

Tristram, however, made no promise of enforcing any such demands. He knew Hylda too well to suppose that he could insist upon the abandonment of what was so dear to her, but he had full belief in the power of love to win her from all that was really harmful. He had often argued the point with his mother, but it had not been broached between them now for a long time; Hylda would not come of age until Christmas, and he was determined to keep his promise of saying no more until then. When they were once engaged, all complications would soon be smoothed away.

Still, he was glad that an unexpected opportunity of receiving Hylda at the Court had presented itself; he could not relinquish the hope that she would win his mother's favour, and that Lady Carlyle would learn to love her as a daughter. He had made his way through the flood that morning full

of joyful anticipations, and even though his encounter with Mr. Weston had startled and annoyed him, he was able to forget it speedily in his pleasure at Hylda's ready acquiescence in his scheme. There was an unwonted gentleness in her manner, a soft light in her eyes when she was silent, and a new sweetness in her tone when she spoke, that made his heart thrill with delightful visions. It was two months since he had seen her, and he had often wondered whether she had missed him; it really seemed as if his absence had been the best promoter of his wishes. Never before had he felt such a response in her manner towards him, and Mr. Weston and the Manor were hardly left behind before his spirits rose to a height that they seldom reached. If it had not been for his aunt's incessant complaints, he would have been sorry when their drive came to an end, but as it was, he was glad when they had splashed their way through the watery roads, and turned in at the lodge gates.

Stowbury Court was one of the show places of the county; its music-room and picture-gallery, its spacious hall hung with armour and panelled with oak, its tapestries and furniture, its conservatories, gardens and terraces, were the pride of the neighbourhood. But in spite of all this, Sir Tristram was not a rich man; his income was small in proportion to the claims upon it, and it was not possible for him to be a just landlord and to live expensively at the same time. Hylda had often reproached him in her eager way for not entering Parliament, and had looked upon his answer, that at present he could not afford to do so, as a mere excuse. It was only his patriotism that was at fault, the expenses of a London establishment could easily be met if he chose to do so; and as for all the business of the estate, other people left such things in the hands of agents, and why should not he do the same? Of late, however, she had said very little about it; Tristram and his affairs interested her less and less as she threw herself more completely into her studies; in a very short time she hoped to have cut out a path for herself, and if he chose to vegetate on in his native soil it would be nothing to her.

And yet, notwithstanding this inward resolution, she could never be wholly indifferent to the sight of the Court. It was impossible to look upon the fine old house in which her ancestors had lived for so many centuries without a glow of pride; it did not represent to her the life for which she longed, but it represented a life—the fibres of which were rooted deep down in her nature, and which, try as she might, could never be eliminated.

The Court stood on much higher ground than the Manor, and for some time the water had become more and more shallow as they climbed the ascending road. Now, as they drove up the avenue, it was comparatively dry; the wind was still chilly, but the October sun gleamed out and lit up the gold and crimson of the falling leaves. Far away in the distance stretched the level, water-clad meadows, while the river rushed on its way past the low-lying town. Hylda gazed on it all in silence, but it was not the flooded landscape that engrossed her; in reality, her thoughts were back at the Manor, in her own study, among the papers which strange hands were at this moment touching and on which strange eyes were looking. How was it that she did not shrink from the thought, when, as a general rule, the intrusion of anyone into her private domain was enough to set her soul on fire?

She woke up from her meditations with a start as the dogcart drew up at the door; Tristram carefully helped out his aunt, and then, coming round to the back, held out his hand to his cousin. Usually Hylda disdained assistance, but to-day there was certainly a change in her manner, and his eye brightened as he felt her hand resting in his own. He little knew that it was the lingering memory of the strong arms that had enfolded her an hour ago that made her so submissive!

"You are tired," he said anxiously, as he looked at her; "I am afraid that all this has been too much for you."

"Oh, no! I am only a little sleepy," she said, rousing herself with an effort.

"You must lie down as soon as you have had some luncheon. Go in out of the wind; I will come as soon as

I have told James to put another horse in the cart and drive back for your maid and the luggage."

"We are giving you a great deal of trouble," said Hylda.

"Trouble!" said Tristram, his good resolutions deserting him for the moment, "you could not give me trouble if you tried."

He was vexed with himself as soon as the words had passed his lips, but his cousin did not seem to be annoyed; on the contrary, she smiled as she went up the steps, and Tristram, who had no suspicion that she had not heard a word he said, felt a sudden rush of joy as he went back to give his orders.

"Well, Harriet, it is very good of you, I am sure, to take in such houseless wanderers as ourselves," said Mrs. Carlyle, as they were ushered into the Blue Room, where Lady Carlyle generally sat in the morning. She did not approve of the term *boudoir*, and thus it had retained its ancient name, although the furniture had long since been changed and the walls re-decorated.

Hylda had endured much moral and mental torture in this room ever since she could remember, and had an intense hatred for it in consequence; but by the outer world it was considered a privilege to be admitted within its walls.

"Tristram said that he should bring you if the Manor seemed damp," said Lady Carlyle in her measured tones. "I suppose that he found it so, as you have come."

"Damp!" exclaimed her sister-in-law, in much indignation. "It is under water!"

"I suppose you mean that the gardens are under water?" said Lady Carlyle, with the patient air of correcting a wilful misrepresentation that exasperated so many of her acquaintances.

"No, I do not," said Mrs. Carlyle, rather sharply, for her nerves were not yet quite under control; "the water is in the house, and it is a very good thing that we were not all drowned in our beds."

"Why did you not send here for help?" asked Lady Carlyle.

"Send here for help! My dear Harriet, you cannot know what you are saying. We had no boat; and even if we had, do you think that anyone could have rowed over here in the dead of night? If it had not been for Mr. Weston I cannot tell what might have happened!"

Lady Carlyle looked up curiously. This was a new name to her, and she would have liked to hear who the unknown deliverer might be; but having just been told that she 'did not know what she was saying, she did not choose to condone the insult by appearing interested in her sister-in-law's adventures. The situation was decidedly awkward, and everyone was relieved when a footstep was heard in the outer room, and Tristram entered with a bright look on his face.

"Well, mother," he said, "I have brought them, as you see. The Manor is a sight worth looking at; the hall is full of water and all the furniture afloat! It will be a great business to get it dry again, and I am very glad that I was able to persuade them to come away from it."

"If it is in such a state they probably did not need much persuading!" remarked Lady Carlyle, who, finding that the account she had just heard was not so much exaggerated after all, felt that she must take up another line of attack if she wished to avoid making an apology.

Tristram could not honestly say that they had been particularly hard to persuade, and therefore thought it best to drop the subject; he saw that his mother was in an ungracious mood, but this was such an ordinary occurrence with her that it did not disturb him so much as it might otherwise have done.

"It is just lunch time," he said, looking at his watch; "come into the dining room and have something to eat. I am sure you must want it."

"I suppose a good deal of the furniture will be ruined," said Lady Carlyle, as they seated themselves at the luncheon table.

Mrs. Carlyle winced perceptibly; the furniture of the Manor was one of the sore subjects that exist in most families.

When her husband died and the dower house was put at

her disposal, no one had imagined that his younger brother would so soon follow him to the grave; so long as Lady Carlyle reigned at the Court all was smooth enough, but since Tristram's marriage had been talked of the subject of her departure had come up for consideration. She had no idea of staying on in a subordinate position; a house of her own she must have, be it large or small, and this determination precluded any possibility of her taking up her abode with her sister-in-law. She could not very well expect Mrs. Carlyle to give up the house in which she had lived so long, but there was another house in a distant part of the estate which had for some time been inhabited by a bailiff, and which would suit her even better than the Manor. Stowfield, as it was called, had however no furniture of its own, and from this apparently trivial circumstance much ill-feeling had arisen.

Mrs. Carlyle, as the widow of the elder brother, believed that she had the best claim to the dower house and furniture, while Lady Carlyle, as the mother of the present baronet, considered that she had a perfect right to demand both and that she was performing a gracious act in announcing her willingness to retire to Stowfield. Tristram had had an uneasy time of it between them, for it was hardly a matter on which legal advice could be called in, and each lady believed her moral claim to the furniture to be firmly established. Like all other arrangements of the kind it had been allowed to drop into abeyance during the last few months, but it was not forgotten by any of the parties concerned; and from time to time, to Hylda's great discomfort and her mother's annoyance, Lady Carlyle would let fall a hint that she hoped her furniture was being properly treated. Most people in such a position would have preferred to furnish their house themselves without further dispute, but this would not have been in accordance with her principles; ever since her husband's death she had been afraid that she should not receive the respect and deference that were her due, and she feared that if she gave way on the smallest point she should soon find herself pushed on one side altogether.

"I really had not time to think of such things as chairs

and tables," said Mrs. Carlyle, with an assumed air of indifference.

She was in reality much afraid of her rigid sister-in-law, and yet she was always provoking the combats in which she well knew that she should be worsted; there seemed to be a fatality about it that she could not resist, and however severely she might have suffered before, she found herself rushing blindly on her fate at the next opportunity.

But on this occasion Tristram came to her aid. He did not wish the harmony between himself and his cousin to be disturbed by a fray on the part of their respective mothers, and he knew by sad experience how long such a fray might last and what dire results it might produce.

"I hope we shall find that the furniture is not so very much damaged," he said; "and as for the ornaments, I think that Mr. Weston has managed to save them all."

His own feelings would have prompted him to be silent on the subject of Mr. Weston, but he knew his mother well enough to be certain that the mention of the name would arouse her curiosity, and he was willing to pay the price of peace.

His expectations were not disappointed.

"Who do you mean by Mr. Weston?" asked Lady Carlyle, coldly, but there was a shade of interest in her tone that Tristram marked with satisfaction.

"I mean Mr. Richard Weston," he said, "the University Extension lecturer."

"But how did he come to be at the Manor?" said Lady Carlyle, in much astonishment.

"You may well ask!" cried Mrs. Carlyle, seizing on the new subject with reckless haste. "He was staying for the night at the 'Black Eagle' at Stowbury, and came over in the boat that they sent to our rescue. He was most attentive, I am sure, and so very clever, he seemed to know just what to do."

"And I suppose he went back again when he found there was no danger?"

"There was a great deal of danger," exclaimed Mrs. Carlyle with much vexation. "You would have known it well enough if you had been there. Of course he could

not think of leaving us under such circumstances; he sat up with us nearly all night, and this morning he set to work to save the things in the drawing-room. The water was so deep that no one else could get through it; in fact, he had to carry us out when we left the house."

Mrs. Carlyle came to a sudden pause. She had not intended to say so much, but, as was often the case, her volubility had outrun her prudence. Tristrain stole a glance at his cousin, and saw that her cheek was crimson; and he turned towards his mother who sat eating her jelly with a stony air of disapproval.

"I told you about the lectures, did I not, mother?" he said. "I am the President of the Centre, so I ought to have mentioned it even if I did not do so, but it was only arranged just before you went to Scotland."

"I have heard nothing of it," said Lady Carlyle; "nothing of it in Stowbury, that is to say. Several people were discussing the movement at Lord McClellan's."

"And what did they say of it?" asked Tristrain, willing to prolong the topic.

"The general impression seemed to be that it was undesirable, and likely to lead to unfortunate intimacies."

"People said **that** of travelling by train when railways were first proposed," broke in Hylda.

She spoke in her most scornful tones, and the effect was all the more startling from her previous silence.

A shadow came over Tristrain's face.

This was the kind of thing that he dreaded, and he began to doubt whether he had done wisely in bringing his mother and Hylda together. There was nothing for it now, however, but to try and make the best of it, and he rushed gallantly into the breach.

"There are objections to every new scheme," he said, "and this one is not free from them, of course; but still, I think the advantages outweigh any possible disadvantages."

Hylda frowned; she hated temporising, and it was one of her cousin's greatest defects in her eyes that he was reluctant to join in her vehement championship of all that



took her fancy. She had battled the subject with him many a time, but an unwonted discretion sealed her lips at the present moment; nothing was further from her wishes than a discussion on University Extension, and more especially on University Extension lecturers. She made no remark, therefore, and Lady Carlyle took up the strain.

"If such things are to be done at all," she said, "they should only be done under the strictest precautions; young people should never be allowed to attend the lectures except under careful chaperonage."

Mrs. Carlyle looked down with rather a guilty expression; on both of the lecture afternoons she had intended accompanying her daughter, but had succumbed to the attractions of her sofa and a new novel; she had her own reasons therefore for desiring to quit the subject, and, happily for her, her nephew took the task upon himself.

"No doubt you are right," he said; "but before I forget it, I must just tell you that I have asked Mr. Weston to dine and sleep on Thursday week, when he will be coming down here again."

"Indeed?" said Lady Carlyle, with a look of some surprise. "I did not know he was that sort of person."

Tristram saw a gleam of anger in Hylda's eyes and hastened to answer before she had time to speak.

"We are bound to show him some civility," he said quietly. "I should have asked him here anyway, but after the assistance he gave last night I thought that I ought to do so at once."

"I should like to know what state the furniture is in," said Lady Carlyle, recalled by this remark to the former subject of her thoughts.

"I shall ride over there presently and see how things are going on," said Tristram, "but I am sure you would like to rest a little while, Aunt Cecilia, you look quite tired out."

"Thank you, my dear, I should be very glad to lie down," said Mrs. Carlyle, rising hastily from her seat. She had not enjoyed the luncheon hour at all, and she felt that she must really secure some repose before she could encounter any more of her sister-in-law's home truths.

Lady Carlyle never lay down in the daytime, and Cecilia's habit of falling on every available sofa was, to her mind, objectionable in the extreme; but even she felt that there was a legitimate cause of fatigue after such a night of agitation, and she contented herself with walking away to the Blue Room in silence.

Tristram was passing through the hall a quarter-of-an-hour later equipped for his ride, when he caught sight of a picture that brought him to a sudden halt. Amid the palms and flowers the fountain was playing, and leaning over the marble basin, her fingers idly dipping in the water, was Hylda, her cheek paler than was its wont, and her hair lying loosely about her brow. Tristram had hardly ever seen her otherwise than radiant with health and energy, and there was something in this unusual languor that stirred his heart to its depths.

"Why are you not lying down, you naughty child?" he said, going up to her side, and looking fondly at the sweet face reflected in the water.

"I wanted to see you before you went," said Hylda, while the colour flitted over her cheek leaving it paler than before.

Tristram's heart beat fast, but he restrained himself.

"I want you to do something for me, if you don't mind," she said.

"Mind!" he exclaimed, a flood of passionate feeling striving for utterance; then, checking himself, he said gently, "What is it you want me to do?"

"I should like you to go into my study, if you will, and see if you can find a bundle of manuscript that I left on the table."

"Certainly. Shall I bring it to you?"

"If it is there, please. It is called, 'Hours of Insight.'"

"I will be sure and bring it," said Tristram. "Good-bye; I shall see you again at dinner-time."

He sprang on his horse and rode gaily away, his thoughts as bright as the sunshine that illuminated the scene around him. If only Hylda loved him, let sorrows and troubles come as they chose, the world would be

Paradise for him ! She had parted from him with a smile, and in an hour or two he should see her again ; it was little wonder that it seemed to him a joyful foretaste of the time when she would always be under his roof, the angel of his house, gladdening and blessing him with her presence.

His joy was a little damped by the fact that though he searched the study carefully he could discover no trace of the manuscript. He found her alone in the drawing-room when he came down to dinner, and the rapture of the thought that she had perhaps hurried down to meet him was dimmed by the vexation of having failed in his quest.

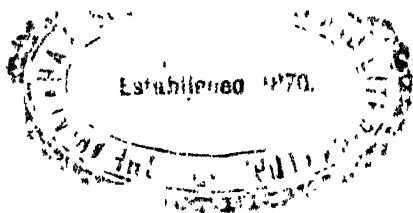
"I hunted high and low," he said, "but I am sorry to say that I could not find your manuscript anywhere."

"Oh, thank you ! " she cried, a sudden gleam of pleasure coming into her face.

Tristram looked at her in surprise. "I thought you would be disappointed at not having it," he said.

"Oh ! it does not matter," said Hylda, hurriedly, "but it was so very, very good of you to take so much trouble about it."

Her mother and aunt entered the room at the moment, and Tristram was speedily overwhelmed with enquiries after the Manor and its contents ; but several times he found himself recalling that unexpected look on Hylda's face. Her mood seemed suddenly to have changed, her fatigue was forgotten, she talked and laughed with all her usual gladness, and as he watched her smile and listened to her voice his perplexity was forgotten in the magic of her presence.



## CHAPTER IV.

Now that Hylda was assured that Mr. Weston had her manuscript, she could wait with patience for his next appearance on the scene. The personal impression that he had made upon her began to fade from her mind, and she thought of him, not as her strong-armed deliverer, but as the intellectual adviser who was to help her out of her literary difficulties. The idea that his opinion of her work might be an adverse one never so much as entered her head; her introduction to him had come about so strangely that it must certainly lead to great results, and her nimble fancy trod the road to fame a hundred times a day.

Meanwhile she had much to occupy her attention; instead of being driven further from her cousin by her new interest, she found an added pleasure in his society. Tristram had never seemed so congenial to her before as he did during these days of constant companionship; hour after hour they sat in the sunny library, sweet scents and sounds coming in through the open window, for the storm had passed away as suddenly as it had arisen, and the bright days that come so often in the middle of October had plunged the world back into summer.

Tristram had a fine voice, and possessed in perfection the rare art of reading aloud. The poets whom Hylda dissected and wrote essays upon, he loved with a deep affection and treated as familiar friends. She had often listened to his reading, but it had never reached her heart as it did now; hitherto the poets had only awakened thoughts within her, but now they touched the spring of feeling.

"I never knew that you cared for poetry so much," she said one day to her cousin.

"One does not talk about the things one cares most for," he answered.

"Don't you think so?" she cried, ready for discussion in a moment. "I always like to talk about the things that interest me, and write about them too."

"Yes, I know you do," he said; "but, forgive my saying so, I think that if you cared about them more, you would write about them less."

He was afraid that he had offended her, but she laughed quite good-naturedly. "What would become of literature in that case?" she said.

Tristram made no answer, it had been on the tip of his tongue to say that genius alone should be the origin of literature, but such a speech would scarcely have been polite, and he stopped himself in time.

"Let me read you something else," he said, and taking up his volume of Browning, he turned over the pages, and began to read aloud:—

"Oh! the old wall here! How I could pass  
Life in a long midsummer day,  
My feet confined to a plot of grass,  
My eyes from a wall not once away!"

His voice gathered in intensity of expression as he went through the verses, and even trembled a little as he finished:—

"Wall upon wall are between us: life  
And song should away from heart to heart!  
I—prison bird, with a ruddy strife  
At breast, and a lip whence storm notes start—

"Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing  
That's spirit: though cloistered fast, soar free,  
Account as wood, brick, stone, this ring  
Of the rueful neighbours, and—forth to thee!"

There was a long silence when he had ended. Hylda lay back in her chair and looked out over the leafy glades of the park; all was so still in the great room with its pillared recesses and book-lined walls that Tristram could hear the light rise and fall of her breath as he gazed down

at her from the broad window ledge where he sat. Surely she must understand what hidden feeling it was that thrilled through his utterance of the poet's words; why should he wait any longer when their sympathies seemed to be drawn closer together with every day that passed?

He had little idea what reflections the poem had raised in Hylda's mind, and when she broke the silence her words jarred upon his golden moment.

"You are very inconsistent," she said, putting away her thoughts as hurriedly as though she feared that he could read them. "You say that you cannot talk of what you really care about, and you immediately read me one of the poems you love best!"

"How do you know that that is one of the poems I love best?" said Tristram, trying to fall in with her mood.

"Oh! by the way in which you read it. But I like it very much too; I quite agree with Browning that there is a subtle spirit that can break through all obstacles, and I should like to hear you read it again sometime."

"I will read it to you to-morrow," said Tristram. If it was fiskaing too much to woo for himself at present, he would let Browning woo for him, and perhaps the poet's courtship would be more effectual than his own. "The horses will be coming round directly, we must get ready."

" 'What if we still ride on, we two,  
With life for ever old, yet new?'"

Hylda smiled, the context of the words was not so familiar to her as to him, and she did not know all that they implied; but Tristram only saw her smile, and as the horses' feet rang out on the road, his heart kept time in a joyous echo.

"Ride, ride together, for ever ride!" . . .

But all hours at the Court were not so peaceful as these.

It was not to be expected that Lady Carlyle and her sister-in-law should spend so much time in each other's company without suffering for it, and several times in the privacy of their own apartments, Mrs. Carlyle told her daughter that she could stand it no longer and should take

her departure for Cheltenham at once. Hylda had much ado to soothe her, but as she dreaded nothing more than that her mother should carry out her intention, she did all in her power to keep the peace.

"Do you ever read aloud in the evening?" she asked her cousin one day when things had been unusually trying.

"I never have done so," said Tristram, "but do you mean that you would like it?"

"I was only thinking that it might be better than so much conversation," said Hylda, with an arch look.

Intimate as she and Tristram were, they never discussed their respective mothers; impatient words had often risen to her lips, but though she could not exactly tell why, she had never uttered them. There was something in Tristram's reticence that influenced her in spite of herself, and in an ordinary way she would hardly have ventured on such a suggestion. But anything was better than an open quarrel, and she had felt so much more at ease with him lately that she was not afraid he would take her words amiss.

Tristram answered her look with a smile. When he and Hylda were one there would be no need of any reservations between them, and each day seemed to be drawing them nearer to that desired end.

"It is a capital idea," he said; "I will begin to-night."

"What will you read?" asked Hylda.

"Well, that is rather a difficult point. I suppose it must be a story?"

"Yes," said Hylda, "or my mother would not like it."

"And it must not be an exciting novel, or my mother would not like it! I have a set of George Eliot's works: perhaps one of them would do, if your mother has not read them; I know that mine has not, she thinks they are too frivolous."

"My mother has not read them either," said Hylda, "she thinks they are too dull."

They both smiled, and Tristram turned to the bookshelves to hide the joy in his eyes; there was something very delightful to him in this little mutual plot.

"Let us take 'The Mill on the Floss,'" he said; "no one could call that frivolous."

"Nor dull either," said Hylda.

And so it was agreed.

Both Lady Carlyle and her sister-in-law looked rather surprised that evening when Tristram appeared half-an-hour before his usual time for joining them and proposed to read aloud to them; they were both relieved; nevertheless, for their conversations were fraught with perpetual difficulties, and no objections were raised when the book was produced.

For several evenings all went well. Lady Carlyle sat and knitted with an air of grim amusement, while she listened to the humours of Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Pullet, and though Hylda saw that her mother snatched a good many furtive naps, she evidently felt considerably excited over the fate of Mrs. Tulliver's furniture. But there were breakers ahead which Tristram had not descried when he first embarked upon his expedition. As the end of the book drew on and his aunt's interest increased in proportion to the love-making, his mother's former opinion seemed to revive in full force; she cast some severe glances of disapproval at her son as he read the story of Stephen's passion and Maggie's struggles, and at last, when he came to the avowal of their mutual feeling, she could bear it no longer.

"I don't like all this, Tristram," she said coldly.

There was a sudden pause. Tristram had been so completely carried away by the scene that he could not at first collect his thoughts to answer, and to his dismay Hylda burst out vehemently.

"Like it, Aunt Harriet! What has liking to do with it?"

"It has a great deal to do with it," returned her aunt, with much displeasure. "For a girl to behave in such a way as is there described is most unladylike; in fact, it is not nice at all."

Hylda could almost have groaned aloud; "unladylike," "not nice"—were these fit terms to apply to such mighty forces of human nature? But it was useless to try and



make herself understood, and she looked despairingly at her cousin.

Tristram, for his part, fully agreed with her; he knew, even better than she did, that it is impossible to mete out the world with a foot-rule, and that his mother's proprieties were about as well able to stem the tide of human feeling as a child's sandbank would be to withstand the rush of an ocean. But what was the use of discussing such things? To tell his mother that Maggie's victory over temptation was a far higher theme for praise than the unimpeached rectitude of a Pharisee, would only be to fill her with unhappiness at his distorted views. He ought to have been more guarded in the choice of a book, and for the first time he felt some pleasure in the prospect of Mr. Weston's visit, as he remembered that on the next evening there would be no opportunity for reading.

The lecture day had come at last, and Hylda, who had felt irritated almost beyond control at the previous evening's discussion, woke with a start of joy as the thought flashed upon her that before the night closed in she should have secured her long-coveted interview.

Even now, however, there were some difficulties in the way. It was quite impossible to talk of her book with Mr. Weston before any third person, and she suddenly began to realise that it would not be very easy to see him alone. Tristram was coming to the lecture she knew, and it was not likely that her mother would stay behind, after her aunt's severe animadversions of unchaperoned young ladies. They would not get back from Stowbury much before dinner-time, there would be no chance of solitude in the evening, and no one could tell at what early hour he might not set off next day. It was very vexatious, and she began to chafe already as she thought of it; but chafe as she might she was practically helpless, and could only wait and see what the day would bring forth.

Tristram had business on hand that morning which occupied him until lunch-time, and consequently Hylda saw nothing of him until he came into the dining-room just as they were finishing their meal,

"I shall drive with you to Stowbury, as I have some

shopping to do," said Lady Carlyle, as they rose from the table. "I have ordered the carriage at three o'clock."

"You will have to start first then," said Tristram; "I have some writing to do before I go; I shall catch you up if I come in the dogcart."

There was but little conversation in the barouche, as the solemn pair of grays made their way to Stowbury. Lady Carlyle was absorbed in a small piece of paper on which she had inscribed a list of her intended purchases; her sister-in-law was thinking mournfully of the soft-cushioned lounge in the drawing-room, and wondering how she should ever survive an hour's dull discourse in the stuffy Town Hall; while Hylda, with nerves at the highest state of tension, was trying to prevent her excitement from appearing on the surface.

The room was but scantily filled when they arrived, and the door-keeper led them up to the very front row of seats. Mr. Weston was not visible at present, and Hylda opened her note-book by way of occupying the time, while her mother, restored to animation by the unexpected sight of some distant friends, made a rapid survey of their autumn bonnets.

A little bustle at the door and the sound of manly steps warned Hylda of Mr. Weston's approach, and she looked up with a feeling of timidity that was quite new to her. The lecturer stood in front of her, his black waves of hair brushed back from his forehead, his master's gown hanging about him in ample folds.

"How do you do, Mrs. Carlyle?" he said, holding out his hand; "I hope that you have quite recovered from your unpleasant experience?"

"Fairly so, thank you," said Mrs. Carlyle, "we are staying at the Court while our own house is being put to rights."

"Are you, indeed? I shall have the pleasure of seeing you this evening then."

He looked at Hylda as he uttered the last words and she responded with a shy glance, but at this moment Sir Tristram Carlyle came up the room, and he was obliged to turn towards the platform.

Hylde eyed the two men curiously as they shook hands and mounted the steps together. Tristram's slight figure and pale face looked almost boyish in comparison with the powerful form at his side, and though his few introductory words were marked by his usual grace of manner, they were speedily swept away from her mind by the torrent of eloquence that flowed from Mr. Weston's lips.

Much as Hylde admired the lecture, however, it did not receive such undivided attention from her to-day as it had done on the two preceding occasions. An undercurrent of engrossing thought was running through her mind all the while: how should she be able to secure an interview with Mr. Weston, and what should she say to him when it had been secured?

She had an expectation that things would arrange themselves according to her wishes, and when the lecture was over and the bulk of the audience rose to depart, she saw her mother get up with secret satisfaction.

"Are you not going to stay for the students' class?" she said, simply for the sake of hearing her anticipations confirmed; but the answer was one that she had not calculated upon.

"Oh, no, I promised your aunt that we would be ready at half-past four."

"But I must stay!" exclaimed Hilda in consternation.

"I could not think of allowing it," was her mother's reply. "Make haste, the carriage will be waiting."

The tears started to Hylde's eyes in pure vexation. It was of no use to argue that she had previously been allowed not only to stay to the class but to walk home unattended; at that time she had not been at the Court, and she knew well that it was the fear of her aunt's criticism that prompted her mother's action.

"But how will Mr. Weston find his way?" she said, making one last desperate effort.

"That is for your cousin to arrange; Mr. Weston is his guest, not ours."

This was incontestable, and there was nothing for it but to follow in her mother's train with outward meekness and a brain that seemed absolutely on fire with irritation. She

had not felt such a storm of passion since the memorable day in her childhood when she had kicked a cupboard door down because she had not been allowed to go out riding. She only wished that she could have kicked something or somebody on the present occasion, but being grown up that luxury was denied her, and to speak crossly to her aunt would be a distinctly impolitic proceeding.

She subsided into her corner of the carriage, therefore, and took refuge in silence, while Lady Carlyle entered upon a lengthy narration of the shortcomings of the Stowbury tradespeople; if she could only have explained matters to Mr. Weston she would not have cared half so much, but it must have looked so rude and indifferent to walk out in that fashion, and the tears came into her eyes again as she pictured his wounded feelings at her desertion.

Tea was ready in the drawing-room when they returned, and she lingered over it as long as she possibly could in the hope that the dogcart would arrive before she went upstairs, but as time passed on and still it did not come, all kinds of imaginations took possession of her. Could it be possible that at the last moment something had obliged Mr. Weston to go back to town? She turned cold at the thought. It was already six o'clock, and in a few minutes more she would be obliged to go upstairs to dress, without having had her anxiety relieved.

Lady Carlyle, meanwhile, sat knitting on as though there were no such things as hopes and fears in the world.

"She is like the knitting women of the Revolution," said Hylda to herself impatiently, as she glanced at her aunt from behind the shelter of the literary journal she held in her hand. "I believe she would knit on unmoved if the universe were falling in ruins around her."

Whether her niece's opinion was an exaggerated one or not, Lady Carlyle had at least no idea of knitting on unmoved when it was time to dress for dinner.

"I think you had better rouse yourself, Cecilia," she said, incisively, as she looked across to the armchair where Mrs. Carlyle was seeking repose after her unwonted mental exertion. "Mr. and Mrs. Chesterford and their brother are coming to dinner, and it is quite time to get ready."

"I did not know that anyone was coming this evening," said Hylda, rather taken aback by this announcement.

"Indeed!" said her aunt, in a tone that implied, "it is no business of yours whether anyone is coming or not."

There was nothing further to be said, and, feeling foiled at every point, Hylda went up to her room to dress. Could anything have been more vexatious? If they had been alone there might perhaps have been an opportunity of private conversation while her aunt and mother did their needlework and Tristram looked at the paper; but now it would be a very different matter, everyone would have their company manners on and there would be no chance of becoming friendly and sociable.

Mr. Chesterford was the Vicar of Stowbury; and though he was one of Tristram's greatest friends, Hylda could never make up her mind whether she liked him or not. Both he and his wife were pleasant whenever she met them, but once or twice she had suspected him of laughing at her ideas, and not all his devotion to his parish could outweigh that offence in her eyes. She much preferred their own old rector, who had known her from a baby, and who admired, petted, and spoiled her, much as her grandfather might have done if he had been alive. Her views on all parochial and social subjects were all equally wonderful in his eyes, and Hylda had often been seriously annoyed at finding that the opinions which Mr. Craven thought so highly of were dismissed with scant ceremony by Mr. Chesterford.

Her vexation did not result in sullenness, however, but rather lent an increased animation to her face as she went downstairs to the drawing-room. Tristram thought that he had never seen her look so lovely as she did when she entered in her floating draperies of silk and lace, her bright hair clustering round her head, and a blush-rose colour in her cheeks.

Jock Chesterford thought so too; he had seen her before in his visits to his brother, but since he had been advanced to the dignity of the University he felt himself to be a connoisseur of beauty, and he came forward eagerly to greet her. Hylda endured his attentions as patiently as

she could. Mr. Weston was not in the room, and she was burning to know whether he had arrived, but she could not bring herself to ask her cousin the question. She was not long left in suspense, however; the half-hour had only just struck when a tall figure entered, and Sir Tristram went forward to meet his guest.

"What were you saying? I did not hear the last sentence," she said, turning back to her companion with a look that fairly entranced him. A delicious sense of satisfaction stole over her as she heard Mr. Weston's voice and watched his movements. What did all the vexations matter? He was here after all, and everything else would come right in time.

From the first mention of the expected guests, Hylda had foreseen that Jock Chesterford would take her in to dinner, but when she concluded that Mr. Weston would sit on her other hand she had forgotten that eight is a difficult number to arrange, and that if Mr. Chesterford sat on Lady Carlyle's right hand and Mr. Weston on her left, it would necessitate Mrs. Carlyle sitting next to Mrs. Chesterford, while she herself would have to sit on the left hand of her cousin. She was thus as far removed from Mr. Weston as it was possible to be, and as Jock was not likely to devote any of his conversation to his brother, she would not be able to disengage her attention sufficiently to hear what was going on at the other end of the table. It was a hard matter to control herself enough to listen to her neighbour, but a stray sentence in his voluble chatter rivetted her interest at last.

"I was awfully surprised to see Weston here," he said, "'Buffer Weston,' as we call him, because he's so like a buffalo. There's another chap of the same name whom we call 'Stagger Weston' to distinguish him, from this one, you know; his hair sticks out on each side like horns, and he's got a bit of a roll in his walk, too, and so it's a sort of pun, you see; rather good, isn't it?"

"Very good," said Hylda, who was ready to forgive the insult to her hero in the expectation of learning something about him. "But I thought that Mr. Weston had left college long ago?"

"Oh! of course he's not at college in the sense that I am, that goes without saying, because he's an M.A., and all kinds of games. But he gets odd jobs there sometimes, and now he's one of those outside brokers."

"Outside brokers?" said Hylda, in astonishment.

"Well, commercial travellers some people call them, and I think it's a better name myself; they go about the country, you know, advertise the business and show samples of the goods, and so they bring custom to the old shop."

"I really do not understand you," said Hylda.

"Oh! come now, Miss Carlyle," cried Jock, in genuine alarm, "I didn't mean to offend you, you know! It's only my rotten way of talking; he's a travelling lecturer, that's what I mean—he goes about extending the University. I remember now, my brother said you were very hot upon it, but, upon my honour, I'd quite forgotten it when I said that. I daresay it's a capital thing, only some people will make jokes about it, and really it is rather funny, you know! A man I know told me that they were getting it up down at his home, and the lectures were called 'Addison and his Contemporaries,' and one of the set was headed 'Cato'—that's a thing Addison wrote, you know—and some old lady, who was asked to take a ticket, said 'Well now, I never knew before that Cato was a contemporary of Addison's!'"

He looked anxiously at his fair neighbour as he finished, hoping that she would reward his story with a smile, but Hylda was not to be moved from her gravity.

"Don't you see that things like that only show what a splendid movement it is?" she said.

"Oh, well, of course you can look at it in that light," said Jock rather ruefully; "it seems to unearth a lot of ignorance, anyway."

"That is just what I mean. The lecturers go about on a quest as glorious as any of the knights of old. I think that the best name for them would be Crusaders, for it is a real crusade against ignorance on which they are bound."

Her eyes sparkled and shone as she spoke, and Jock felt

quite cowed by her enthusiasm, while Mr. Weston watched her from his end of the table, and wondered what her companion could be saying to rouse her interest so keenly.

For him, the dinner had been distinctly dull. Mrs. Carlyle had no conversation beyond the limited range of her own sensations, physical and mental, and though he found his hostess a good deal more intelligent, her cut and dried way of setting forth her statements was extremely unattractive to him. He was glad when the ladies left the room, for he was quite as anxious as Hylda to secure a little uninterrupted conversation, and he knew that he should have no chance of doing so until they met in the drawing-room.

The fates, however, were clearly against him; Hylda was at the piano when the gentlemen came in, and before he could reach her she seemed to be surrounded and monopolised by Chesterfords. The Vicar was a thorough musician, and both his wife and brother had good voices; they seemed to know by heart all the duetts, trios, and quartettes in existence, and as Hylda had often sung with them there was no getting out of it now. Her voice was clear and high, contrasting well with Mrs. Chesterford's fine contralto; but, as the Vicar did not scruple to tell her when she sang flat or played wrong notes in the accompaniment, she did not take much pleasure in their performances.

Mr. Weston did not care for music, and after a little desultory conversation with his hostess he strolled about the room examining books and ornaments. Hylda watched him with longing eyes, missed her place, stumbled over a bar, came in at the wrong lead, and finally broke down altogether.

Mr. Chesterford looked at her reproachfully, but Jock stretched himself with a sigh of relief.

"I've been wanting to stop for the last quarter of an hour," he said; "singing makes my side ache. I'm only down here because I got a squeeze at football."

Hylda hardly waited to hear his explanations, she got up from the music-stool and walked over to the other side of the room, leaving Tristram to make all the polite speeches.



Jock was not to be shaken off, however, and had just made his way over to her when Mr. Weston came up with a book in his hand.

"This is your copy of Matthew Arnold's 'Essays in Criticism,' I believe," he said; "I took it up because I wanted to verify a quotation."

"Have you found it?" asked Hylda.

"Yes," said he, drawing up a chair near her own, all unconscious of the displeasure expressed in Jock's face. "I wonder if you have ever noticed a curious thing that struck me the other day. Arnold's address to Oxford in which he speaks of her as a serene and adorable mother, steeped in sentiment, calling her children to perfection and beauty, forms a remarkable contrast to De Quincey's address to Oxford Street: 'Oxford Street, stony-hearted stepmother, thou that listenest to the sighs of orphans and drinkest the tears of children.' It may be a fanciful point perhaps, and yet there is something interesting in it. There are plenty of men to whom Oxford has been a mother, who have found a hard but wholesome after-discipline in Oxford Street!"

"Why Oxford Street in particular?" asked Jock, annoyed at the glowing appreciation of Hylda's look.

"Oh! of course Oxford Street is symbolical of the strain and stress of London life; Miss Carlyle understands, I see."

He turned from Jock rather contemptuously, and looked down at the eyes that were raised to meet his own.

"Oh! yes, I understand," said Hylda; "it is just that strain and stress of life in which I long to mix; one does not really *exist* when one is cabined and confined."

"That is true to some extent," said Mr. Weston, "but you must remember that the range of our ideas is not circumscribed by our surroundings. It was when Raleigh was confined in a dungeon that he planned out his 'History of the World.'"

"I would put up with the dungeon if I might see as much of the world first as Raleigh did," said Hylda. "I often wish——," but there was a general movement in the

room before she could finish her sentence, and Mr. and Mrs. Chesterford began to make their farewells.

"I don't think that a stupid man is half such a bore as a man who is always being intelligent!" said Jock, as Mr. Weston went forward to shake hands.

Hylda looked at him indignantly, but recollecting herself she gave him a smile as she said good-night and sent him away happy.

It was after ten o'clock, and to her dismay she saw that her aunt did not resume her seat, but was evidently preparing to retire. Her heart swelled with disappointment, but as Tristram re-entered the room Mr. Weston went up to him and said in his usual easy fashion, "Will it be inconvenient to you if I stay until after lunch to-morrow? I have promised Miss Elton to give her girls half-an-hour's talk in the afternoon."

Tristram of course could make but one answer.

"I shall be delighted," he said; and as Mr. Weston held Hylda's hand a moment while he said good-night, he breathed into her ear the word, "To-morrow!"



## CHAPTER V.

"I AM sorry that I shall be obliged to leave you to-day," said Sir Tristram, as they sat down to breakfast next morning; "there is a magistrates' meeting that I am bound to attend."

"I shall be sorry to lose your company," said Mr. Weston; "but you need not trouble about me, I have some letters to write."

"You will be quite undisturbed in the library," said Lady Carlyle, with a palpable air of relief.

Hylda could hardly believe that she heard aright; yesterday everything had seemed to go badly, and now, for no particular reason, everything seemed to go well. Mrs. Carlyle had asked to have her breakfast in her own room, which meant that she would not appear until lunch time; she knew that her sister-in-law hated people to have breakfast in bed, and now that she looked upon her position at the Court as secure, she liked to show her independence. In an ordinary way Hylda would have urged her to get up, but she felt to-day that each person removed from the scene would be one obstacle less in her path. Tristram, however, had been the real difficulty, and here he was proclaiming his absence with his own lips! It seemed almost too good to be true. • •

As soon as breakfast was over, she went upstairs to her mother's room. Mrs. Carlyle had an interesting book in hand and did not care for conversation; but this did not matter. Her bedroom looked out on the front drive, and Hylda settled herself by the window and watched for the appearance of her cousin's horse. Nearly an hour passed

before the welcome sight met her eye, but as soon as Tristram had ridden off down the avenue, she went to her own room that she might see if her hair was in order, and then set out on her expedition.

Now that the coast was clear, however, and she had nothing to do but descend, a sudden shyness took possession of her. Would not Mr. Weston think it forward of her to go and seek him out—ought she not rather to wait until he came to her? But if she waited in the hall or the drawing-room she might be found by her aunt at any moment, for though Lady Carlyle was sure to give the library a wide berth, she would probably make her usual morning excursion round the house.

She stood for some time on the staircase in a state of shivering indecision, sheltering herself in one of the recesses where light-bearing statues stood holding their lamps on high; but when half-past eleven chimed out from the clock in the hall, she took her courage in both hands and ran down the remaining steps without giving herself time to think.

"After all, it is only a matter of business," she said to herself as she turned the handle of the door.

She almost started back as she entered, for Mr. Weston was close to the threshold.

"Were you going out?" she asked, looking at him with some trepidation.

"I was going to look for you," he said abruptly; "why did you not come before?"

The words were wanting in courtesy, but Hylda did not notice it; he had been wishing for her, and all her fears were forgotten directly.

"I thought you were busy," she said evasively.

"So I was. Busy wishing that you would make haste and appear."

Hylda did not answer; the very boldness that jarred upon Tristram seemed to her to constitute the chief charm of Mr. Weston's conversation, and no sooner was she in his presence than she submitted to its spell.

"Sit down," he said, pushing forward one of the low cushioned seats in which the library abounded.

"This is a delightful room for work, is it not?" said Hylda, with some natural pride in her surroundings.

"It is a nice room enough," said Mr. Weston carelessly, "but I would rather be in the British Museum if I wanted to work, and in my club if I wanted to lounge. However, I daresay it suits a recluse like your cousin well enough."

"Do you call him a recluse?" exclaimed Hylda, "he is a very active man, and takes part in all that goes on in the county."

"I daresay he does, but he is a true provincial all the same. By the way, may I ask how Lady Carlyle regards your literary aspirations?"

He looked full at her with his daring smile, and Hylda forgave him for his disparagement of Tristram.

"I try not to let her know anything about it," she said; "she cannot understand things of that kind at all; in fact ——" She paused, a remembrance of Tristram's reticence on such subjects coming over her.

"In fact, she does not understand *you* at all, I suppose!"

"Well, I think that is about the truth," said Hylda; "but in case we should be interrupted, I think we had better talk about the Essays first."

A momentary cloud rested on Mr. Weston's face; he would gladly have postponed the discussion of the Essays altogether if he could, but as that was not possible, perhaps it was best to get it over at once, and turn to happier subjects. He would have been glad to praise the book immoderately if he had not been afraid of the consequences; but much as he wished to secure Hylda's good opinion, he was not inclined to do anything to risk his reputation as a critic.

"I have read your book very carefully," he said, "and there are one or two points of detail that I have noted down to mention to you. The first is the title. 'Hours of Insight' is a very good title in itself, but it is one that very few would care to adopt."

"Why not?" asked Hylda in surprise. "It is a quotation, you know, from Matthew Arnold."

"Yes, I know that," said Mr. Weston, hiding a smile as

well as he could. "What I mean is that it assumes too much. 'Eagle Flights' would be a good title; but you would hardly describe your own thoughts by that name!"

"No, of course not," said Hylda, slowly; "and you think that 'Hours of Insight' has the same sort of meaning? Well, if so, it must be altered; but I want to know what you think of the book itself; for, after all, the title is the smallest part of it."

"A publisher would not tell you so! However, we need not discuss that any further now. You have asked me for a candid opinion, and I am going to give it to you. I do not think that the book had better be published at all."

"What!" cried Hylda, in utter consternation.

The possibility of such a verdict had never entered her head for a moment, and she was completely thunderstruck. The book that was to make her name and start her on the road to fortune condemned to oblivion? If it had been anyone but Mr. Weston who had pronounced the sentence she would have thought it could only proceed from a conspiracy of jealousy!

Mr. Weston had been prepared for the effect of his words, and he was not surprised by it.

"You may be quite sure that I do not say this without full consideration," he said; "consideration not only of your essays, but of the circumstances of your case. If you were writing for your daily bread, I should advise you, as I have advised many another, to go straight into the rough and tumble of literary work at once; learn to swim by being pitched into the water, learn to conquer by being battered about in the fight. That is how I did, and I learned wisdom from every fall and plucked victory from every defeat."

He paused a moment and drew a long breath, as if with the memory of past encounters, then turning again towards Hylda, his voice took a softer tone.

"But I cannot advise this for you. What you want is to achieve some sudden glory, and show that you are not the puppet that your relations believe you to be. You must not risk failure, and therefore it will be far better for you to wait until you are sure of success."

He had turned this remark over in his mind a good many times, and flattered himself that it was a very neat way of veiling the fact that "Hours of Insight" was a crude and superficial performance, showing but little promise of better things.

Hylda looked at him with a puzzled air.

"I don't quite understand you," she said at last. "You said just now that the only way to get on was to join in the struggle; if I keep out of it how shall I attain success in the future?"

Mr. Weston bit his lip; he had expected her to be annoyed by his opinion, but he had not thought that she would discover its inconsistency. However, she had proved more acute than he supposed, and he must give her an answer.

"I did not mean that you were never to join in the struggle," he said, in an explanatory tone. "I thought—and I still think—that for the present your best course is to hold back a little. I shall be delighted to give you any help I can; if you will send me some of your things, I will criticise them to the best of my ability. I only wish that it were possible for me to introduce you into some literary society; it is the want of congenial atmosphere from which you are suffering, and your talents will never fully expand until you can obtain it."

Hylda looked up at him with glistening eyes. It was perfectly extraordinary to her how this man understood her inmost thoughts; in some ways it almost alarmed her, and yet she could not deny that it was very sweet.

"How do you know just what I feel?" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"Perhaps because I have felt the same myself! I know well what it is to live in an uncongenial atmosphere. I did not mention to your mother the other day that my father is in trade, because I could not tell how she might take it; but I do not mind mentioning it to you, for I can see that you are above all such vulgar prejudices."

Hylda felt rather startled by his words, but she would not show it; since he called it a vulgar prejudice, she would not belie his trust in her nobility.

"The world has changed very much in that way from what it was fifty years ago," he went on quietly; "to be exclusive, nowadays, is to be old-fashioned. The Universities have done a great deal to break down the ancient boundaries of Society, but the movement is in fact a general one. Money, merit, and intellect are the three recognised powers in the world at the present time."

"I don't see why people should be recognised because they are rich," said Hylda, feeling bound to say something in opposition.

"Don't you? There is far more reason in it than in recognising men because they are well-born. It requires intellect to keep money as well as to make it, and therefore the man of money is generally the man of intellect, too; while, so far as I can see, good blood, like good wine, gets into men's heads and dulls their senses."

"That is quite a novel doctrine," said Hylda, feeling as powerless to argue as she was unable to agree.

"The more you think of it, the more you will find how true it is. But now let me tell you a little about myself. My father is a grocer, or in more polite language, a provision merchant, at Yarmouth. He is a thoroughly hard-headed man of business; I inherit a good many of his qualities, but, unhappily, I don't inherit his tastes. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps, for my younger brother has not got the stuff in him to do well at anything, but fond as I am of the old man, I could not sacrifice myself to his wishes. I got a University scholarship when I was quite a youngster, and nothing would satisfy me but going up to college as soon as I was old enough. We had some strong scenes, I can tell you, but I got my own way at last, as of course I knew I should. I hated vexing my father, but I knew that I should have vexed him far more if I had gone into the business, for I should never have had my heart in it."

He paused, but Hylda's eyes were fixed upon him with a look of such eager interest that he was encouraged to go on.

"My mother cried her eyes out, and Jo was miserable, for he knew that if I persisted he should be booked for



trade, and he had set his heart upon going into the army. I was tempted to give in more than once, but I knew that I was really doing for the best if they could only see it; and at last things came out right, as they often do in the end. As soon as I took my degree my father's opinion began to change, he was pleased at my success, and by the time I had started in literary work and set up as a lecturer, he was quite ready to be reconciled to my choice. We have grand times now when I go home, for though they don't care for literature they are the best-hearted people in the world."

He looked at Hylda for sympathy as he finished, but she scarcely knew how to reply. His story had opened a new world to her in its mixture of warm family feeling with a life that she had been accustomed to think of as sordid. She herself had been surrounded with refinements from her birth, but it had never been a source of grief to her that her ideas were not in harmony with those of her relations.

Mr. Weston was used to reading faces, and he saw that, liberal minded as she might be, she had received a certain shock in finding that her guide, philosopher, and friend was the son of a grocer; but he had had his own reasons for making the confession and did not regret it, nor was he afraid of its ultimate effect upon her mind.

"I know that you will hold my confidences sacred," he said; "I have hardly ever spoken so freely of my private affairs before; but we certainly seem to understand one another very well. As you will easily imagine, I have had a good deal to put up with in the course of my life, and it is very refreshing to meet with a little sympathy."

The words were all that were needed to unlock the spring of Hylda's feeling.

"Thank you for telling me," she said earnestly; "I shall remember what you have had to bear when I feel discontented; but I cannot think of troubling you about my work when you have so much of your own."

"If you don't send me something more I shall conclude that you are offended," said Mr. Weston, "so you had better take care. I shall see you when I come down again, and then you can give it to me."

"But I shall only see you for a few minutes after the lecture!" said Hylda, a sudden feeling of dismay seizing upon her as she realised that their interview was almost over, and that it was uncertain when another could be obtained.

Mr. Weston paused for a moment in thought; he was quite determined to have another conversation, but he did not wish to make too daring a proposal at present.

"I have promised Miss Elton to have tea with her after the next lecture," he said; "could you not go too?"

"I don't think I could, we have never called upon her."

"But not to have called upon her socially is no reason why you should not call upon her 'extensively!'"

"Do you really think so?" said Hylda, smiling. "Very well then, I will. I can easily make some excuse about the questions, because my mother would not let me stay to the class yesterday."

"Indeed! I thought you looked like an unwilling victim on the maternal altar."

"Did you?" said Hylda; "I was afraid you would think——" She paused a moment, and went on again leaving her former sentence unfinished. "But even if I call on Miss Elton, how am I to ensure her asking me to tea?"

"I will take care of that," said Mr. Weston; "I shall see her this-afternoon."

"What are you going to lecture to the girls about?"

"I am not going to give them a lecture, only a talk on study in general. It is rather hard work, as I have to get off by the six o'clock train to be in time for another lecture to-night, but she has been so energetic in starting this Centre that I was glad to have an opportunity for making her some return."

"It is very good of you," said Hylda; "I wish I were one of the girls, that I might hear it."

"I am very glad you are not," began Mr. Weston, but the sound of the clock striking one put an end to his remark.

"I must go!" cried Hylda, rising hastily from her seat. "My mother will be wondering where I am."

Mr. Weston made no attempt to detain her; he rose

too and walked with her across the room, but before he opened the door he held out his hand and said in his low tone of command: "Say good-bye to me now."

She put her hand into his without a word, and he held it fast for a moment. "We shall soon meet again," he said, and letting her pass into the hall, he went back to the writing-table to make a hasty finish of his letters before the luncheon-gong sounded.

Mr. Weston had never spoken more brilliantly than he did at his lecture that evening. His thoughts flew through his brain almost more quickly than he could grasp them, and were uttered with a power and vigour that surprised himself. Nor did he feel in the least wearied as he went back to London by the night mail; the rapid motion of the train and the flashing lights as they swept through the stations, suited his mood to perfection and roused his restless excitement to the highest pitch.

A smile crossed his face once or twice as he remembered the reluctance with which he had accepted the invitation to Stowbury. A dull little country town where the audience would be scanty and the attention sleepy, was not at all what he cared for, and he had done his best to discover some decent excuse for refusing.

Supposing that he had refused, how different his life would have looked to him at this moment! He knew now why it was that destiny had pushed him on against his will and brought him to this place. He had never loved before, he had had his share of fleeting fancies but he was not the kind of man to wreck his career for a folly, and now the crown of his life had come to him just when and where and how he would have chosen if the choice had been left to him. There might be obstacles—there very probably would be—but he gave himself no concern about them; he had overcome the obstacles that his own relations had put into his path, and if Miss Carlyle's relations erected obstacles in their turn he would no doubt be able to overcome them with equal success. Determination was the great requisite, possessed of that a man could do anything he chose: by its aid he could even get the better of any reluctance on the part of the woman he loved, but it

did not seem that there would be any occasion for that in the present case.

If Hylda had been of a different position in life, or if she had had no beauty to recommend her, he would merely have scorned the readiness with which she responded to his advances; but being above him in station, and gifted with a beauty that fascinated him, her kindness had nothing but attraction in his eyes. It would be an easy task to win her, but he liked it none the worse for that reason. As soon as it was expedient to do so he would strike the decisive blow, and if he disappointed Sir Tristram Carlyle by the way, he would be all the better pleased. It was clear that the baronet loved his cousin, but how could any girl be expected to admire a lack-lustre fellow like that? Title, position, and wealth were all on the other side, but Richard Weston felt that it was not he who was presumptuous in aspiring to Hylda's hand! One of her chief merits in his eyes was her power of appreciating his brilliancy, and he honestly admired her for her good taste.

If Hylda could have read his thoughts she would have been dismayed and startled. The clear and definite scheme that filled his mind had no place in her own; she was only conscious of a dreamy radiance that coloured all her visions and made life seem a dim vista full of infinite possibilities, instead of a narrow groove of hard and fast limitations. She had no idea what the sudden change implied; she knew that a strain of music, a golden sunset, a starlit sky, would touch a chord in her breast that had never thrilled before, and more than once the tears had risen to her eyes as she read some poem that she had often coldly analysed in the past; but though it was strange she did not wonder over it, for she attributed it all to the fact that she had at last met with a friend who could understand her peculiar trials.

Meanwhile the new softness of her manner drew her nearer and nearer to Tristram; their walks, their talks, and their rides seemed to him fraught with ever-increasing meaning, and his only dread was the time when they must be separated. Having, however, fulfilled her intention of

staying until after Mr. Weston's visit, Hylda was anxious to get back to the Manor; it was too far for her to walk into Stowbury from the Court, and she was all eagerness to make her call on Miss Elton before the next lecture. Nor had she long to wait, for now that she relaxed her efforts to keep the peace between her mother and aunt, an occasion was not slow in arising which she was able to turn into a cause of departure.

Lady Carlyle was one of those people who aspire to be conscience-keepers to their friends as well as to themselves, and she had been much exercised for some time on the subject of her sister-in-law's style of dress. Since Tristram's marriage had been first talked of she had noticed a gayer tone of colour peeping out here and there, and she felt that she was bound to express her disapproval. Despite her moral courage, however, she felt that the subject was a difficult one, and she had hitherto contented herself with gentle hints, which Cecilia had consistently ignored. But now that she had her under her own roof, the opportunity was too good to be lost, and as soon as the cousins had started for a ride on the morning after Mr. Weston's departure, she went to seek her and invited her graciously to come and keep her company in the Blue Room.

Mrs. Carlyle was flattered by such a mark of condescension, but she was also rather alarmed. To sit with Harriet was an honour but it was not a treat, and gathering up her crochet she followed with much apprehension. Except when she was at the Court she never did any needlework; it lay on her little table in the Manor drawing-room ready to be taken up if Harriet should drop in, but as it was never used except as a shield against reproach, it was not easy to make much way with it. Clutching it desperately now she entered the sanctum, and drew a chair close to the fire.

"It is not a good plan to put one's feet on the fender," said Lady Carlyle severely, as she sat down at some distance from the hearth and began to knit.

"I don't find that it does me any harm, thank you," said Cecilia.

Lady Carlyle frowned. She did not mind at all whether

it hurt Cecilia or not, but she did mind very much that feet should be placed upon her sacred fender; however, she could not very well say so, and she reverted to her original attack.

"It may not harm you, my dear, but it is very bad for your dress; the fire cannot fail to scorch it."

"Oh! do you think so?" said Mrs. Carlyle. "I will turn it back over my knees."

Now, if there was one thing that roused Lady Carlyle's indignation more than another, it was that people should treat her with disrespect, and what could be more disrespectful than for Cecilia, when invited into the Blue Room, to lounge in an armchair with her dress turned up as if she were a washerwoman?

Perhaps Mrs. Carlyle was not altogether unconscious of this; at any rate, she did her crochet in an airy and indifferent manner that added tenfold to her sister-in-law's wrath, and destroyed her last chance of escape from the impending lecture.

"I must say that I wonder you are so careless of your dresses when you spend so much upon them!" remarked Lady Carlyle, with an acid inflection in her tone.

Cecilia knew what was coming now, but she was not without a certain wit and courage of her own, and she gathered up her forces for the fray.

"It is very kind of you, dear, to take such an interest in my expenditure," she said languidly.

Lady Carlyle felt the satire, but she chose to ignore it.

"Of course I take an interest in you," she said; "I have always treated you as a sister, as you very well know."

Cecilia did know. To treat anyone as a sister is to possess an unlimited licence for telling her facts, a process that is among the upper classes what throwing saucepan lids and fireirons is among the lower. Cecilia objected to being told facts, and she wished very much sometimes that Harriet did not treat her as a sister. She made no answer, and Lady Carlyle was obliged to begin again.

"Of course it is quite right that people should dress

suitably to their station, but they should also dress suitably to their age. I always try to do so myself."

"I know you do, dear," said Cecilia, sweetly. "I always admire it in you so much, and I hope I shall do the same when I come to your time of life."

The thrust was too tempting to be resisted, but Cecilia shivered as she made it. Lady Carlyle was several years older than her sister-in-law, although she had married the younger brother, and she did not care to be reminded of the fact.

"I am sorry that you should jest on such subjects," she said severely. "A sense of the becoming would surely lead you to feel that you ought not to forget your sad situation in blue and yellow."

This was a direct insult! Was Mrs. Carlyle's new evening dress of purple silk, with its lovely Parisian trimming of golden thread, to be designated as blue and yellow? All her feelings were in arms at once.

"There may be different opinions of what is becoming," she said; "Tristram told me that he thought my dress most becoming, and just what he liked to see me in."

This was, on the whole, a sharper dart than the last, for it touched a source of danger as well as of discomfort. Tristram's love and admiration were the objects of his mother's keenest jealousy, and that she should see them bestowed on Cecilia and her daughter was almost more than she knew how to bear. It was impertinent and malicious to have made such an allusion, and she must be punished.

"Of course if you asked Tristram whether he thought your dress becoming, he could not very well say no," she replied; "but I must remind you again that I only speak as a friend. Many people would hear the remarks on your appearance that I have heard and say nothing about them, but I have adopted a more straightforward course. I did not expect gratitude; and therefore I am not disappointed."

She relapsed into majestic silence, and Cecilia knew better than to question her on the sources of her information; she could attack Harriet as gaily as a terrier attacks a Newfoundland, but when she had once roused her ire

the only safe course was to turn and flee. She worked on for a few seconds, therefore, at galloping speed, dropping more stitches than she made; then, suddenly bursting into tears, she dried her eyes with her crochet, and rushed out of the room.

She was still weeping on her bed when Hylda returned from her ride, and, in answer to her daughter's enquiries, poured out such a flood of incoherencies that it was impossible to understand anything beyond the fact that there had been a grand engagement, horse, foot, and artillery!

"I cannot stay another day, another hour!" sobbed Mrs. Carlyle hysterically.

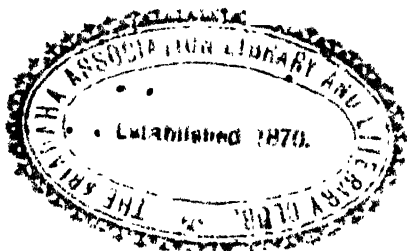
"You shall go back to-morrow, mamma," said Hylda, who seemed quite unconcerned in spite of the commotion.

"But what will your cousin say? We must not offend him."

"Tristram won't mind; we rode round by the Manor this morning and I told him that as the house seemed to be dry I thought we had better go back and see about getting it into order."

Mrs. Carlyle was somewhat comforted, and having spent a quiet afternoon in her room she was able to appear at dinner, when she found to her joy that Hylda had arranged for their departure on the next day.

Whether Tristram was quite as acquiescent as his cousin supposed was a matter of doubt, but having received an animated account of the fray from his mother he felt that on the whole the two families had better try the truth of the poet's celebrated statement that "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."





## CHAPTER VI.

MISS ELTON was a cheerful-hearted little person, who was suited for her work in life by her temperament as well as by her attainments. She knew how to take the rubs of fortune without wincing, and if people who had slighted her when they had no need of her sought her out when necessity arose, she did not visit their offences upon their heads.

Hylde Carlyle met with a pleasant reception therefore when she paid her call, and Mr. Weston's cleverness and kindness were topics that speedily put them on a friendly footing. It was evident that he had won Miss Elton's heart by the interest he had shown in her school, and she only wished that she could do something to show her gratitude in return. Before he left her house he had asked her in a casual way to invite Miss Carlyle to tea after the next lecture if she came across her, as he wished to talk over her papers with her and could not so well do it in the hall. Miss Elton could not bear to refuse any request from one who had taken so much trouble for her, but she knew that few things were more unlikely to happen.

When Miss Carlyle appeared, therefore, it seemed to her nothing less than providential, and the invitation was given and accepted before Hylde had even time to wish for it.

Hylde did not find the intervening days hang heavily upon her hands; she had plenty to do in the house, and much of her time was occupied in looking over her papers and selecting those that she thought most worthy of Mr. Weston's attention.

She had no difficulties to overcome when the day at last arrived; Tristram was in London, and there was no fear that her mother would risk another infliction of dulness now that she was out of the range of Lady Carlyle's criticism. As soon as luncheon was over she set forth unmolested on her walk with a heart so full of joyful anticipations that the November day seemed as bright and glad as spring itself.

The lecture and class were over all too soon, but Hylda did not grudge the moments so intensely as usual; something better was to come and she was impatient to have it within her grasp. The students took their books and departed, and soon there was no one in the hall but Mr. Weston, Miss Elton, and herself.

"I think we might go now," said Miss Elton. "You will come in and have some tea Miss Carlyle, will you not?"

"Thank you," said Hylda, "I shall be delighted."

She avoided meeting Mr. Weston's eye as she spoke, and drawing back a little as they went out into the street, she managed to make Miss Elton walk between them.

Mr. Weston was not displeased; in fact, every sign that showed him how much Hylda felt his power was delightful to him; and he talked eloquently to Miss Elton as they went, with the consciousness that someone on her other side was drinking in every word he uttered.

Miss Elton generally had tea with the girls, but to-night a table was set in the drawing-room in honour of the occasion.

"Miss Brown, Fraülein Hollman," she said, as they entered the room, and found two governesses in possession.

A gentleman visitor at Stow House was so rare as to be exciting in the highest degree, and Miss Elton was too good-natured to keep the treat all to herself. Miss Billing, the music-mistress, had been crying furtively, at intervals during the day, because it was her turn to take "duty" that evening, but though her two companions were sincerely sorry for her, they did not feel that they were called upon to sacrifice themselves in her behalf. Miss Brown had looked out her silver bangle and found a flower with which to adorn her collar, while Fraülein Hollman had washed

both her face and hands, two events which had never coincided before within the memory of man.

Hylda's appearance was a surprise to them. They had not counted on the presence of a beautiful young lady in a fashionable dress and black Spanish hat with drooping plumes.

And yet, had they but known it, they need not have suddenly despised themselves for their little attempts to do honour to the guest; proud and distinguished as Miss Carlyle might appear, it was exactly the same motive as their own that had led her to don her best hat and her new gloves on this damp November afternoon, and had made her slip out of the house without seeing her mother for fear of incurring a reproof for her extravagance.

They would have liked her better if they had known it, but as it was, they thought her cold and unapproachable; and, struck dumb by the magnificent hat, they sat in a corner and stared at her. Hylda, for her part, never noticed them at all after the first introduction: she was too happy to think of herself or of anybody else. No spacious and gilded saloon could have seemed to her so satisfying as Miss Elton's small and cheaply-furnished parlour, and her only regret was that the moments were flitting by so fast. It was already nearly half-past five, and she knew that she must go at latest at a quarter to six; even then she would be risking remark at her long absence, but she could not tear herself away sooner.

"You have brought some papers for me, I hope," said Mr. Weston, as Miss Elton turned to offer the governesses another cup of tea.

"Yes, I brought a packet with me, but are you sure that it is not too much trouble?"

He looked at her without answering, and Hylda blushed, she could not have told why.

"I am afraid I must go now," she said, rising hurriedly from her seat, as the clock struck the quarter.

She had had a vague hope that Mr. Weston might offer to walk back with her, but he did nothing of the kind, and as he bade her a courteous farewell she could hardly command her voice to answer. Was it always to be like

this—brief meetings and speedy partings? It seemed too hard that she should have no opportunity of uttering the overflowing thoughts that filled her heart.

It was quite dark outside, and the November mist had turned to a drizzling rain; she paced wearily along the road, too listless even to open her umbrella and save her feathers from the rain. What did anything matter if she was always to be thwarted in that which her soul desired? She stopped for a moment when she reached the bridge and leaned upon the parapet; the long dark road to the Manor stretched away on the other side, and she glanced at it with a sigh thinking that it was like the dreary path that she would have to tread through life.

The rushing of the river was in her ears, and she did not hear a footstep that came along the silent street, but, as she turned to go on, a low, deep voice sounded close beside her.

"I was afraid I might miss you. I could not get away before."

She looked up with a start of joy that she could not repress and Mr. Weston was quick to observe it.

"There is no place for gossip like a girls' school," he said, smilingly, "I thought it better to let you have a start."

The words gave Hylda a shock of surprise. Up to the present moment she had never given one thought to Mr. Weston in any other light than as a literary friend whose counsels were invaluable to her. She was bewildered and startled but she was not offended, and even in the first confusion of her feelings she felt a new and delicious pleasure stealing through her veins.

They walked on silently for a few moments and then Mr. Weston spoke again.

"It is raining quite fast," he said, "and you have no cloak: you must put on my mackintosh."

"Oh, no, thank you!" exclaimed Hylda, "indeed I do not want it."

"It is too dark for anyone to see you," said Mr. Weston, answering her unspoken objection as easily as though she had uttered it. "Give me your books and put your arm in here."

He held it out as he spoke, and taking away the books she carried put them into his pocket. Hylda resisted no more; a spell was upon her, and she let herself be put into the cloak and covered up.

"Now I can shelter you," he said, taking away her umbrella and opening his own.

"My own umbrella will do quite well, thank you," she said, making an effort to speak steadily though her voice shook under the stress of mingled feeling.

"Your own cobweb!" he said, smiling; "it would not keep the rain off a butterfly!"

She made no further remonstrance and they walked on in silence; Hylda's pulses outrunning her steps in a tumultuous race, and Mr. Weston feeling that the charm of the present moment was fast destroying his resolutions of prudence.

"Why should he not tell her at once all that was in his heart, since he felt certain that he had only to ask and to have. But in spite of the intoxication that filled his brain he could not forget all the arguments by which he had schooled himself to patience. He had heard from some of his Stowbury acquaintances that Miss Carlyle was to come of age at Christmas; would it not be better to wait until she had attained her majority, so that she might be able to act with independence if her relations should prove obstructive? There would be two more lectures before the holidays began, and by that time no one would be able to say that his proposal was too sudden. So he argued with himself, and, therefore, he deemed it better to recur to impersonal subjects.

"You have gone back to the Manor then," he said, beginning on the first topic that presented itself to him. "I did not know that your visit was to end so soon."

"We found it better to go," said Hylda, answering him as usual without any subterfuge.

"Lady Carlyle is not an easy person to get on with, evidently," he said, with some amusement in his voice. "I don't mind those ultra-conscientious people myself except when they think they have a right to interfere with

me. I should think she must have been a thorn in her husband's side ! ”

“ I believe she was,” said Hylda, “ and I fancy that she knows it. She is so very conscientious that because she made him miserable when he was alive, she thinks she ought to make everyone else miserable now.”

Mr. Weston laughed, and Hylda's secret regret for her inconsiderate remark was forgotten in her pleasure at his enjoyment. It was very nice to feel that she could say what she liked, and that even her most thoughtless speeches were certain of being understood and admired.

“ She has no business to make you miserable, at any rate,” he said ; “ I wish I had the chance of telling her so ; I would soon let her know that you have a champion to defend you.”

He looked down at her protectingly under the umbrella, and Hylda's heart began to beat fast again and her breath to come in snatches.

“ I am making you walk too quickly,” he said ; “ I did not notice we were going up-hill. You had better take my arm.”

“ I can get on quite well, thank you,” said Hylda, a sudden perception seizing her of what her friends would feel if they could see her.

Mr. Weston quietly took her hand and put it on his arm. “ You are obstinate,” he said ; “ it must be a hard task to manage you ! ”

“ I never let people manage me,” said Hylda, all the more defiantly because she felt her obstinacy as wax in his hands.

“ Then I must break you in,” he said ; “ you have had your own way long enough, it seems to me ! ”

“ That is just what I have never had,” said Hylda, “ I have told you that before.”

“ I know you did ; I have not forgotten anything you ever told me. But though, in one sense, you have not had your own way, in another you have always had it in spite of everything.”

“ I can't understand metaphysics,” said Hylda, who did not wish to acknowledge the truth of his words.

"Then you must be taught."

"I can't think why everybody wants to teach me and improve me and alter me!" she burst out with a pretty show of petulance. "My mother wants me to be different, and my aunt wants me to be different, and my cousin is always trying to make me different."

"What business is it of his?" exclaimed Mr. Weston, so fiercely that Hylda's hand trembled as it lay upon his arm.

She did not answer, for she felt that she had stumbled upon dangerous ground, and he went on in a low but rapid tone:

"He ought to think you perfection! Not that I want him to think about you at all; but he has no right to criticise you."

Hylda looked up in surprise. Mr. Weston could almost have laughed as he realised how speedily the impersonal topic had become a personal one in his hands. He resolved to try some safer subject, but Hylda's next words scattered his resolutions to the winds.

"I suppose he thinks that he has a right," she said.

She meant no more than that Tristram possessed the right of a cousin and a life-long friend, but Mr. Weston interpreted the words differently.

"Why did you not tell me so before?" he said, almost flinging her hand from his arm; "what business had you to trifle with me?"

She stood still and looked at him in utter amazement and distress; she had never in her life been spoken to in such a tone, but it was not resentment that kept her silent.

"Tell me," he said, hoarsely, "are you engaged to your cousin?"

"I don't know what right you have to ask the question," said Hylda, her spirit reviving a little.

"I have this right, that you have let me show you every attention in my power, that you have never repulsed me, and that you have led me on till I am your slave! And now you turn round and tell me that another man has the right to try and mould you to his will."

He spoke vehemently, and under the rush of his words

Hylda caught her breath as though she were being buffeted with fast-coming waves; but in the midst of his angry reproaches one thought gleamed out like a light on stormy waters—he loved her!

"We had better say good-bye here," he said, dropping his voice into a regretful tone. "You have deceived me, for you cannot possibly have misunderstood me; but I shall never blame you, even in my thoughts."

She looked up imploringly. "Mr. Weston," she said, "do not be so angry with me."

He did not answer, and she strove for power to go on.

"It is not as you think; I am not engaged to my cousin. I——"

She paused, and he came a step nearer and seized her hands in his own.

"Go on," he said; and she obeyed him.

"My cousin did ask me to marry him some time ago; but I told him that I did not want to pledge myself. He was very good, and promised me that he would say no more for the present; but my mother is very anxious for it, and everyone expects it, and when Christmas comes——"

She broke off again and was silent.

"But what are your own feelings about it?" he asked, still holding her hands in a firm grasp and searching her face with his eager eyes.

"I have been feeling more and more that I never can!" she said, a deep sob escaping from her lips, and shaking her whole frame.

His hands trembled, but he would not release her yet.

"Tell me one thing more," he said; "if you can never love your cousin, can you ever love me?"

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. She lifted her eyes for a moment with a look half-shy, half-smiling, and then the long lashes drooped again and hid them from his sight.

"Tell me!" he said, insistently.

She shrank a little away from him and seemed to plead with him for mercy; but he would not let her go, and drawing a long breath, she answered:

"Yes, I can!"



"My little one! My little darling!" he cried, folding her in his arms. "No one shall ever take you from me again."

There was a long silence, a silence that Hylda had no wish to break; she felt as if life could never have a sweeter moment for her than this.

Mr. Weston was the first to speak. Even while he experienced his first rapture he knew that storms lay upon its other side, and, precious though his prize was, he was already blaming himself for his undue haste in winning it.

"I hate to let you go," he said, "but it will not do for me to miss my train."

"But it is not anywhere near seven o'clock yet," said Hylda, in alarm.

"No, no, but I must see you home first. Did you think I should let my little treasure wander about alone?"

Hylda thrilled with delight under his voice, his look, his touch; it was a bliss so new, so overwhelming, that she had no strength with which to resist it. He looked at her rather anxiously, for he did not wish her to meet her mother while this mood lasted.

"Let us walk on a little," he said, "I have something else to say to you."

He put her hand on his arm again, but they had only gone a little way when footsteps were heard on the road before them, and they started hastily apart. A young man came out of the darkness, and passed so close that he almost brushed against them.

"Was not that young Chesterford?" said Mr. Weston.

"I believe it was," said Hylda. "At least, he walked with the same sort of limp. But I thought that he had gone back to college."

"No, I met him with his brother on my way to the lecture, and he told me that the doctor would not let him go just yet."

"Do you think he saw us?"

"Oh! no, it is too dark."

He paused for a moment; this meeting made it all the more necessary to say what he had in his mind, but it was not quite easy to begin.

"I expect that we shall have a good deal to go through," he said, "or rather, I shall have a good deal to go through, for I do not mean to let any of it fall on you. Your relations are sure to be up in arms as soon as they know that I want you; I shall not attempt such a difficult task by letter, and therefore I must wait until I come down again, and in the meantime you had better not say anything about it, I could not bear to think of your facing such a storm alone."

Hylde was so touched by his tenderness for her, that she had no room for any other consideration, and she willingly promised what he asked.

"I shall write to you in a day or two," he said as they reached the lodge gates, "and you must write to me. And now we must say good-bye; kiss me before I go."

The farewells might have lasted on indefinitely had not the clock from the Manor stables struck seven; and, tearing himself reluctantly away, Mr. Weston disappeared into the darkness, and Hylde went on to the house, striving for calmness with efforts that met with but little success.

How was she to meet her mother? That was the first and most difficult question. The blood was rushing through her veins with a force that almost stunned her; she felt as though she were walking on air, and her hand shook as she tried to turn the door handle. Her only chance was to slip upstairs to her room, and try to wash away her excitement in plentiful cold water!

She had calculated that her mother would still be in her bedroom preparing for dinner, and that therefore she should escape a meeting until she had finished her hasty toilette. She was not to be so fortunate, however. Mrs. Carlyle had been to her daughter's study to look for her, and not finding her upstairs or down, had taken alarm at her absence and was roaming restlessly from room to room.

"My dear child, where have you been?" she exclaimed, as she hurried into the hall at the sound of the front door. "I have been in such a dreadful state of mind about you! It is not at all right that you should be out of doors alone so late, and your feathers are quite spoilt, and so are your gloves; and whatever is that you have got on?"

She stared curiously at Mr. Weston's mackintosh, which had been forgotten in the hurry of parting, and Hylda's cheeks, which had been crimson before with annoyance, were now doubly dyed with confusion.

"I will tell you all by-and-bye," she said, moving hastily towards the staircase; "it is just dinner-time, so I must not stop now."

"I know it is just dinner-time, that is why I could not imagine where you were. Dixon will be very vexed, for the dinner will be quite spoilt by the time you are ready; and she said only yesterday——" but here Mrs. Carlyle came to a full stop, for the sound of Hylda's closing door revealed to her that she was uttering her complaints to vacancy.

Few as the minutes were that elapsed before Hylda reappeared, she had done a good deal towards conquering her agitation. What she longed to do was to lock her door on the world and give herself up to the full tide of a delicious reverie; but, since this was impossible, she must obliterate her feelings and assume an armour of defence.

It would be better, she thought, to plunge into the subject at once rather than to wait for the questions that were sure to come, and they had no sooner sat down to dinner than she said in a tone as matter-of-fact as she could make it, "I went in after the lecture to have a cup of tea with the secretary, Miss Elton, and I borrowed a mackintosh as I had forgotten to take my cloak."

"You went to tea with Miss Elton?" said Mrs. Carlyle; "I am sorry you did that! If you had asked me beforehand I should certainly have said 'No.' Not that Miss Elton is anything but most respectable, I am sure; I have always heard an extremely good account of her since she came to Stowbury; but still she has pupils from among the tradespeople in the town, and one can never tell who one may find there. Mrs. Chesterford mentioned something the other day that she had heard from Mrs. Bolton, the chemist's wife, and I know she said she had met her while she was calling on Miss Elton."

"There were no chemists' wives there this afternoon," said Hylda.

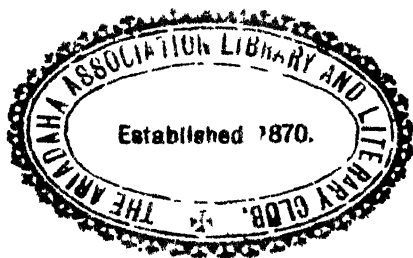
She spoke quite good humouredly, for though she felt a little scornful as she thought of the way in which Mr. Weston would regard such a speech, she was so relieved that her mother had fixed upon the visit and not the belated walk as the object of her attack, that she could afford to be patient.

"No, my dear; but I did not only mean chemists' wives; I merely took Mrs. Bolton as a sample of the kind of people that one might meet, and there is no other chemist in Stowbury as you know very well. But talking of chemists, I hope you have taken some spirits of camphor on a lump of sugar, nothing else will prevent you from catching cold."

Hylda smiled without answering; the mingled excitement and sweetness of which she had drunk so deeply seemed to her far more likely to keep off the effects of the November mist than any sugar and camphor yet prepared by mortal chemist; but still it was a cheap price to pay for going to bed early, and she accepted all her mother's recommendations on the condition that she might go upstairs at nine o'clock.

Not until her door was finally shut for the night did she allow her thoughts to turn to the inward joy that lay hidden in her breast. The name of love had been to her hitherto as a song in a strange tongue, but now she had learned its meaning, and it seemed to draw her, body, soul and spirit, into its rhythm and melody. She could not at present fix her mind on any details, the future stretched away before her clad in a haze of luminous glory; now at last she should find all that she had thirsted for—appreciation, sympathy, and intellectual companionship.

One only drawback there was to her felicity: she could not yet face the idea of having her new-found happiness subjected to the cold scrutiny of her friends and relations. She shuddered as she thought of the struggle that lay before her; but as she remembered her lover's words the shudder passed into a glow of rapture. He had told her to trust to him and all would be well; and how could she do otherwise than trust him when she loved him with all her heart and soul?



## CHAPTER VII.

A MACKINTOSH does not seem to be a very fruitful theme for a poet's pen, and yet, when Hylda received her first letter from Mr. Weston, she felt that she should never hear the word again without being transported to the realms of romance. He pictured the mackintosh's feelings in being allowed to enfold the loveliest form in the world; he spoke of his own longing to be where the mackintosh now was, and of his joyful anticipation of the time when he should be able to lay, not only his mackintosh, but all his worldly possessions, at her feet. In the meantime, he asked for it back again, much as he wished to leave it with her, for since he might not see her face nor hear her voice, he could not live without the hallowed garment, every fold of which would speak of her who had worn it.

Hylda found no difficulty in answering the letter; her pen was always ready to flow, and now that her heart was so full, she only longed for the relief of pouring it out on paper.

"Have you returned that mackintosh?" asked Mrs. Carlyle a day or two later.

"Oh, yes; I returned it at once," said Hylda.

Her conscience smote her uncomfortably as she remembered the closely-written sheets that had rested in the folds of the parcel; she tried to imagine what her friends would say if they knew, and then put the thought away from her in dismay. But they never would know, that at least was certain. The secret was hidden from all but themselves, and when Mr. Weston made his proposal in due form she would be able to forget that any previous understanding

had existed between them. She wished that things could have been managed otherwise, but she was perfectly satisfied by her lover's reasoning that it was impossible; and since it was impossible, what was the use of worrying herself about it? Each day brought her nearer to the bliss of another meeting, and in the meanwhile she had an inward fount of joy at which to slake her thirst.

But when the day of the lecture at last arrived, a bitter disappointment came with it. Hylda had not been able to entrust the posting of the precious parcel to any hands but her own, and this had necessitated a second walk in the rain, the result of which was a heavy cold that in spite of all manner of remedies would not be shaken off. Up till the very last morning she had cherished the belief that it would disappear in time, but when she woke with an undiminished cough and a racking headache, she knew that all hope was over.

"You will not be able to go to your lecture to-day, my dear," said Mrs. Carlyle, as she came into her daughter's room.

"No, I suppose not," was the dejected answer. "I shall have to send my book to be changed; can someone take it if I write a note?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Roberts is going into Stowbury this afternoon, and he can take it for you."

Hylda's despair was not so complete as it would otherwise have been, since she felt certain that Mr. Weston would no sooner hear of her illness than he would come up to the Manor.

After all it would have been very embarrassing to meet him again under the fire of so many eyes; it would be much more comfortable if he came to see her at home, and when her mother heard what he had to say she could not do less than ask him to stay to dinner to talk it over. There would be no chance of anyone coming in from the Court to disturb them at that hour, and as her mother would be easily won over by his eloquence, they would have one peaceful and happy evening of which no one could rob them.

She had almost come to think that her cold was provi-

dential by this time, and she wrote a few lines to Mr. Weston with the blissful certainty that before the day closed he would be at her side.

As soon as she had had some luncheon she made a careful toilette and descended to the drawing-room where Mrs. Carlyle was sitting snugly ensconced by the fire.

"My dear Hylda, what are you doing?" she exclaimed, as her daughter came in. "You ought not to have stirred out of your room to-day; the passages are quite cold, and even this room is not so warm as your own. You look very flushed, and I am sure you will take fresh cold."

"Oh, no, mamma, I shall not," said Hylda, rather impatiently. "I am sick and tired of staying in my room. I thought you would have been glad to have me downstairs again."

"So I am, my dear. I do not seem to have seen much of you lately, you are always so busy in your study with your reading and writing. I am very glad to have a chat with you, for there are several things I want to say."

This was going rather further than Hylda had bargained for. She had intended to indulge in a long delicious dream as she watched the hands of the clock move nearer and nearer to the delight in store for her, but since she had seemed to expect that her mother would be glad of her society, she could not very well refuse to speak. She was not prepared, however, for what was coming.

"Your cousin came to enquire for you yesterday, my dear," began Mrs. Carlyle in a confidential voice; "I should have told you this morning if Nelson had not been in the room."

"Why should that make any difference?" said Hylda, "I am sure Tristram comes here often enough."

She spoke with some vexation; it was too irritating to have her cousin dragged into the conversation just when she wanted to be quit of him.

"Oh, yes, my dear, I know; but we had a very special conversation yesterday. I asked him a little about his visit to London, and he told me that he had been doing business with his lawyers, and then he said that Christmas

would soon be here—less than a month now—for to-day is the 29th, you know.” \*

She paused as if for assent, but Hylda made no remark ; there was a horrible feeling within her as though she had thought to step on firm ground, and had found herself falling instead into a black, cold depth. Since Mr. Weston had told her that he loved her, she had lost all remembrance of her cousin's claim upon her ; it had seemed too vague, too shadowy, too distant to be worth thinking of, and now all of a sudden she found it close to her feet, dark and terrible, a gulf that lay right in her path, and from which there was no escape. She could not command herself sufficiently to speak, and Mrs. Carlyle went on unheeding.

“I am sure that very few men would have been so patient as dear Tristram. With all he has to offer, he might very well have been offended at your holding off so long ; but he has not a word of reproach—really, he almost made me cry yesterday, he spoke so beautifully about the future, and how he should do all in his power to make me happy.”

Each word seemed like a blow upon an open wound, and Hylda shivered as she listened. It was fearful, but what could she do ? To speak now would be to confess all ; in another hour Mr. Weston would be here and this sickening strain would be over ; but in the meantime she must say something, and she caught at the first words that offered.

“Tristram has no right to talk in that way until things are settled,” she said.

“My dear child, what do you mean ?” cried Mrs. Carlyle. “Things are settled in all but name, as you know very well. I am sure no one could have seen you with your cousin when we were staying at the Court, without feeling that it was all understood between you. As I said to him yesterday, it is just a proof how wise he has been in waiting, for I really thought sometimes that he ought to have pushed things on a little more ; but of course he knows best how to manage you, and I told him——”

At this point the door opened, and a maid entered with



the tea-things; an interruption that just saved Hylda from a dire catastrophe. She was not given to fainting, but she could not have endured the torture any longer. The room was deep in shadow by this time, and as her mother turned to speak to the maid, she shuddered from head to foot and buried her face in the cushions of the chair.

"Is Roberts not back yet?" asked Mrs. Carlyle.

"No, ma'am; it is only just five o'clock, but he told me to bring in tea if he was not back then."

"Tell him to come to me directly he gets in. I want the postal orders he was to bring."

Hylda heard, and a faint gleam of relief stole over her misery. When Roberts came she should hear some news of Mr. Weston, and she managed to drink a cup of tea and even to make a show of being interested when her mother entered upon a detailed account of the object and destination of each of the postal orders that she was expecting.

But as the hands of the clock drew on to the hour of six, her agitation returned in full force; any moment now might bring the sound of the bell, and she wondered how she should be able to rise and greet the visitor with any appearance of calmness. The opening door made her start and tremble, but it was only Roberts with his postal-orders on a salver and a book in his hand which he laid before his young mistress.

"Was there any message?" asked Hylda.

"Yes, miss. Mr. Weston wrote a note."

He handed her a small twisted piece of paper and retired before she could ask him any more questions. Hylda turned pale as she took it, not that she feared any surprise on her mother's part at her receiving it, but because she knew that if he had meant to come he would not have written. It only contained these words: "Returning to town to-night. Will send an answer by post." Her lips trembled as she read it. It was not its brevity that distressed her; she knew that he could not write more in an open note, but the feeling that he could leave her in her suspense without making any attempt to see her was bitter in the extreme.

"You look very pale," said Mrs. Carlyle, as she ceased at last from her engrossing calculations.

"I think I will go back to my room," said Hylda, in an unsteady voice; "I feel very tired."

It was as much as she could do to get upstairs, and as soon as she was alone she gave free vent to the tears that had been gathering all the afternoon. The light seemed to have passed away from her life as quickly as it had arisen, and all was cold and dreary once more.

This mood, however, was but a transient one. When Hylda awoke next morning she was quite ready to believe that she had been foolish and unreasonable. No doubt Mr. Weston had some important engagement that took him back to town, and as soon as his letter came she should see how much she had wronged him.

If she could have seen what was passing in his mind she might not have consoled herself quite so well. There was no reason why he should not have come to the Manor beyond the fact that he did not choose to do so. Richard Weston was a man who worshipped his own obstinacy, glorifying it under the name of strength of will. He boasted that what he meant to do he did, and what he did not mean to do remained undone. It had been a severe shock to him therefore to find that though he had resolved to wait until the day of his last autumn lecture before speaking of his love, he had lost his self-control and broken his solemn resolution.

And yet, severely as he felt the shock, he did not blame himself; his will was as strong as ever, it was the force of circumstances alone that had overcome him. He had come down from London weary with work and depressed by an encounter with an editor who had taken the most dispassionate view of his capabilities; Hylda's sweet face, her smile, her voice, her gracious ways, all these had intoxicated him, and when he had her alone in the darkness, her hand clinging to his arm, her eyes plainly overflowing with joy at his presence, how was it possible to do otherwise than as he did? No, he was not to blame, that was evident. If anyone was to blame, it was Hylda, who had

led him on against his judgment; it might be ungenerous to throw it upon her, but that he could not help.

It was a mistake to have come to an understanding before he made a definite proposal, and the only thing now was to keep it an absolute secret, for he did not at all relish the idea of standing before Hylda's relations as a culprit. It might have been thought that as the understanding had been arrived at, it would be best to strike the decisive blow at once and obviate the necessity of longer concealment. This was not Mr. Weston's opinion, however; the fact that he had wavered from his original purpose did not lead him to alter it, but rather to go back to it with renewed determination. He had no pity for Hylda's state of agitation and suspense: she had managed to wait one fortnight, and there was no reason why she should not wait another; the arguments that held good before he had been hurried away by his feelings held good still, and he determined to tell her so when he saw her.

But though his decision was fixed, he had not looked forward to the task of declaring it; if Hylda met him with tears and appeals it would not be easy to persuade her, and it was too soon yet to answer her authoritatively. But, to his surprise and relief, he was spared the struggle; her place at the lecture was empty, and the note handed to him by Roberts told him the reason. She did not actually ask him to come to her, but he knew perfectly well what her wish was, a wish that he had no intention of gratifying. She would be disappointed, no doubt, but at least he should not see her distress; and he had little fear but that he should be able to convince her by a carefully-worded letter.

If he had but known it, however, he might have spared himself the time and labour that he spent over his composition; Hylda's heart had convinced her long before his letter arrived. She could not see why it was necessary to wait, but since he said that it was necessary, she was quite ready to believe it. The fortnight would soon pass, and all her troubles would be at an end; in the meantime, she must summon her patience and fortitude to her aid. Her cough seemed to her now more providential than ever, for, by means of a little judicious nursing, she could spend most

of her time in her own room. Her cousin's calls of enquiry were frequent, and though he was in ignorance of all that had happened, it was not very easy to meet his eye, and she was glad of an excuse for avoiding him.

When there were no visitors staying at the Court, Sir Tristram was fond of indulging in a little Sunday solitude. He liked to take a long walk over the fields, ending up with the service at the Stowbury parish church, and sometimes he extended his leave of absence so far as to go into the Vicarage to luncheon.

He did so on the Sunday before Mr. Weston's final autumn lecture. December had come in with a fine, frosty change in the weather, that was good for health and spirits after the chill damp that had preceded it. An elderly and uninteresting pair, who had been staying at the Court, had departed on the Saturday, and Tristram got up on Sunday morning with a delightful sense of freedom and exhilaration. It would be just the day for a good walk, and a talk with Mr. Chesterford would be a pleasant relief after the unceasing platitudes of the past week; there was even a chance that Hylda would be downstairs on this sunshiny day, and if he came home by the Manor, he might at last succeed in finding her. Altogether it was a cheering prospect; and, thinking that he might as well make the most of it, he sent word to his mother that he was going to breakfast early, and should not be back till dinner-time.

The walk over the fields seemed to him more invigorating than usual that morning and the winter landscape more beautiful, the old church had never looked more picturesque nor the singing sounded better. He went to the Vicarage after service, and Mrs. Chesterford's kindly welcome and the cheerful look of the drawing-room with its piles of books and music, put the finishing touch to his sense of satisfaction.

"I have not had a chat with you for an age," said the Vicar, as they stood and warmed themselves by the fire. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I was in town for a little while, and since then we have been entertaining a succession of people. We shipped the

last detachment off yesterday, and I am making the most of my liberty, as you see. But what have you been doing?"

"Well, I have had a good deal of tiresome business; the trustees are making themselves obnoxious about the piece of land for the new gymnasium. But I must explain it to you by and by, for here comes my wife to say that luncheon is ready."

The meal was soon over, for Mrs. Chesterford went to the school on Sunday afternoons, and as soon as she had left the room the two friends drew their chairs up to the fire. Tristram did not wish to reach the Manor before half-past three, for he knew that his aunt did not like to be disturbed too soon, but the anticipation of seeing Hylda which had been like a delicious undercurrent to his thoughts all day, grew more and more prominent in his mind as the time went by.

"When did Jock leave you?" he asked, as he took up the poker and leaned forward, idly beating the coals in the grate.

"One day last week. That reminds me of something that I think I ought to tell you. You remember the night we dined at the Court?"

"Yes," said Tristram, looking at a little jet of flame, and thinking that it was hardly so bright as the gleam in Hylda's eyes.

"Well, I had never seen Mr. Weston before, but I did not take to him much, though I daresay he is a clever fellow."

"He is clever enough, but he is not a gentleman," said Tristram carelessly, as he tried to stir up another little flame in place of the one that had died down.

"That is just what I thought; however, that is not the point. A few days before Jock left he had been out for a stroll and was coming back late in the evening when he saw two people 'linking,' as he expressed it, under one umbrella. He would have thought little of it but that the man was Mr. Weston, and he could not imagine who he could be walking with as he has no friends down here."

"He must have been mistaken," said Tristram.

"I don't think he was; he knows Weston well, and as

it happened we had met him that afternoon as he came from the station. However, I should not have thought it worth mentioning to you if it had not been for something I heard a day or two afterwards."

The vicar stopped and looked rather uncomfortable, and Tristram glanced at him curiously, wondering why he should make so much of it.

"You must excuse my repeating such a thing," began Mr. Chesterford with some little hesitation, "but I think that you ought to know. Our housemaid is a daughter of Jennings at the Manor lodge, and she had been there that same evening to see her mother, and my wife overheard her telling one of the other servants that she had seen Miss Carlyle coming home with a gentleman."

Tristram did not speak for a few moments: he went on beating the coals, but his hand shook and his face was white.

"Well, what then?" he said at last, "it is quite conceivable that Weston may have seen her home if it was a stormy evening."

"Yes," said the vicar slowly, "but I must tell you all. Emma said that they kissed before they parted."

The poker fell from Tristram's hand with a crash, and pushing back his chair he strode across to the window and stood looking out. The anger that he felt was so intense that he could hardly keep himself from clenching his fist in Mr. Chesterford's face.

"How dare you repeat such a thing in my hearing!" he said, turning round at last and glaring at him with eyes that shone out of his white face like living coals. "It is a lie—a foul lie—and the tongue that uttered it ought to have been torn out by the roots!"

Mr. Chesterford got up from his chair and stood before his friend with a look of calm sadness.

"Don't quarrel with me, Carlyle," he said. "I have not said that I believe it, but you are your cousin's protector and you ought to know that people are making free with her name."

Tristram's face softened somewhat. "Yes," he said, "I am her protector and I will see that this libel is choked as

it deserves to be. I ought to thank you for telling me, I know, but it is not easy to thank the man who drives a knife into me, even if he does it with the best intentions."

"I am afraid you will not find it very easy to take any steps about it, all the same," said the vicar.

"Why not? If you tell your housemaid that she is a liar, it will be the first step towards putting it right."

"My dear Carlyle, I know what I am risking, but you must hear me out. I have never had cause to doubt the girl's word, but still I should have thought it was a mistake, and put the whole thing out of my mind if I had not heard the same story in the choir vestry this morning. One of my tenors is brother to Charles Nisbet, the groom at the Manor, and while he and another man were putting things ready, I heard him talking about what his brother had seen when he was talking to Emma Jennings. They did not know that I was near, and I went in and told them that they must not talk in that way in church; but it decided me that I ought to mention the matter to you."

"Not talk in that way in church!" cried Tristram in bitter scorn. "They may slander her anywhere else then, I suppose? Why did you not go and knock the lie down their throats?"

"Pardon me, Carlyle," said the vicar steadily, "but I must first know that it is a lie."

Tristram's whole frame quivered with passion. "Do you mean to say that you doubt her for a moment?" he burst out, "the noblest, purest——"

He stopped a moment to wrestle with his anger, and then began again. "Because two low-minded people who are absolutely without regard for truth——"

"Hush!" said the vicar, "you have said quite enough. I will do everything that lies in human power to help you, but I will not hear you slander others. There is no doubt some mistake, and we will clear it up; but, as I said before, it will be a difficult thing to do, for only Miss Carlyle herself can really disprove it."

"Do you think that I would allow her to be insulted by hearing of it?" cried Tristram.

"Certainly not; but if, as I do not doubt for a moment,

we can discover that she was somewhere else at the time in question, I will undertake to set the matter straight."

"It is degrading her to make conditions of that kind," said Tristram; "her own character is the only proof needed. You have no right to ask anything else."

"Will you consent to this, then," said the vicar, ignoring his remonstrance. "When we met Weston that afternoon, I asked him to come in here after the lecture for some tea, and he excused himself on the plea that he was going to Miss Elton's. Now, if we can find out that he was really there, we shall know that he could not have been walking with Miss Carlyle."

He looked hopefully at his friend, but to his surprise there was no answering relief on Tristram's face; the shade on his brow grew darker than before, and though his voice no longer sounded indignant it was cold and constrained.

"I believe that my cousin was at Miss Elton's on that evening," he said.

Up to this moment the vicar had been sternly judicial, but he no sooner saw the change in his friend than he became fully as eager as Tristram had been before.

"That need not prove it," he said; "someone may have come to fetch her home, or the carriage may have been sent for her. After all, it is no fair test."

"Yes, it is," said Sir Tristram, in the same grim tone. "What kind of person is this Miss Elton?"

"A thoroughly good-hearted woman, and one who knows how to hold her tongue."

"Then I will go and speak to her myself."

"My dear Carlyle," said Mr. Chesterford, considerably taken aback; "do you think that is wise? It will create a good deal of remark."

"I am my cousin's protector, as you said just now," replied Tristram coldly, "and as for remark, after all that has been said a little more will not make much difference."

Mr. Chesterford did not raise any more objections, nor did he proffer any sympathy; he had too much knowledge of human nature. The sympathy would be ready if his



friend should need it, and no one hoped more strongly than he did that it would never be claimed.

Sunday afternoon was Miss Elton's weekly time of repose. The day scholars were all at home, and the boarders out for a walk with the governess on duty, so that she felt she might conscientiously put her feet up on the sofa and enjoy the luxury of a book. Even when the door-bell rang she did not disturb herself, for Sunday callers were almost unknown, and when the kitchenmaid, who was the only servant at home, threw open the door and announced Sir Tristram Carlyle, she sprang up with towzled locks and a general look of confusion.

Miss Elton had often seen the young baronet driving or riding in Stowbury; and, as the principal person of the neighbourhood, his name was often in people's mouths, but she had never expected to be introduced to him, and she was in as much of a flutter as her sensible nature permitted.

Tristram saw nothing of this, however; his mind was fixed on one thought to the exclusion of all others.

"You will be surprised at my calling upon you," he said, "but I have come with a special purpose, and I will not detain you long. There have been some malicious rumours going about the town which perhaps you may have heard."

Miss Elton blushed up to the roots of her hair. She had heard the rumours, and they had pained her excessively, for she had been charmed by Miss Carlyle. Her first idea was that this formidable visitor had come to reproach her with having set them afloat, and she was filled with indignant regret.

"I cannot help knowing to what you allude," she said, "but I hope you will believe me when I say that I have never listened to the story, far less repeated it. One of my governesses heard it and talked about it, and I not only reproved her severely, but forebade her to mention it again."

She spoke with an earnestness that gave her dignity, in spite of her dishevelled appearance, and Sir Tristram only wished that the vicar could have heard her. It might have

made him ashamed of his half-hearted methods of proceeding.

"I never did you such an injustice," he said warmly; "I came to you upon a different errand. Can you tell me at what time Mr. Weston left your house?"

"Yes, I can," said Miss Elton, catching his drift in a moment, though Hylda's name had been unspoken. "He did not leave the house until six o'clock, a quarter of an hour after Miss Carlyle had gone. I remember the time, because I told him that his train did not go until twenty minutes past seven, and he said that he had somewhere to go first."

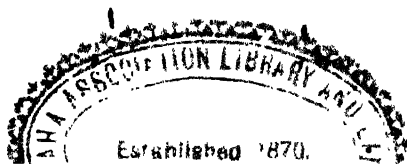
"Thank you!" said Tristram, with a long breath of relief.

"I did wish very much that I could get it set right," went on the little schoolmistress, out of the fulness of her heart. "That dear young lady! I could not bear to hear such things about her. And Mr. Weston, too, so kind and good as he is! You cannot thank me more heartily than I thank you, for I have felt quite miserable about it."

"That is a trump of a woman!" said Tristram to himself, as he marched down the street in triumph. What a fool he had been to let such nonsense weigh on his mind, and what a double-dyed fool Mr. Chesterford would feel when he saw how he had let himself be deceived!

He found the vicar on his way to the afternoon service, and told him the result of his interview in a few words. Mr. Chesterford listened gladly; but not even his penitence could mollify Tristram, and the two parted on rather strained terms.

It was too late now to go to the Manor, but Tristram was not altogether sorry; his heart was still hot within him when he thought of Hylda, and it seemed to him that it would be an insult to enter her presence before he had rid himself from the soil of such a degrading encounter.



## CHAPTER VIII.

ALTHOUGH Tristram was sincerely fond of his aunt, he had not a very high opinion of her wisdom, and when the day of the lecture again came round he took steps to prevent Hylda from being seen alone in the hall.

"Are you going to drive into Stowbury to-day?" he asked of his mother that morning.

"I had not thought of doing so, but I can if you wish it."

"Well, I have to go to the Manor about the new stables, but as I am going on to the lecture I would rather not ride; so, if you are driving, I will ask for a seat in the carriage."

Lady Carlyle was rather glad to have an excuse for going to the Manor without herself proposing to do so. She had not met her sister-in-law since her departure from the Court, and she felt that it was quite time to see how things were going on. Hylda was dismayed, therefore, by the arrival of the carriage soon after luncheon, and at the announcement that there were two empty seats, if they wished to be driven into Stowbury. She knew that her mother would not dare to refuse, and in a moment all her bright hopes of a solitary expedition were dashed to the ground.

She had received a letter from Mr. Weston that morning to say that he should stay the night at the "Black Eagle," and should come up to see Mrs. Carlyle in the course of the evening; all her nerves were on the strain, and she hardly knew how to make the effort of appearing at her ease.

"I don't think you have got over your cold yet," said Tristram, when they were seated together in the carriage; the elder ladies were well started on a thorny discussion, and there was no chance of his remark being overheard.

"I am much better, thank you," said Hylda, flushing up and then turning pale again.

Tristram looked at her fondly; it seemed too horrible that anyone so fair and sweet should have been made the subject of such a story.

"I am not sure you ought to be out," he said. "You must promise me not to stay to the class."

"Oh, no, I had not intended to stay," said Hylda.

Mr. Weston had in fact told her that he would rather she did not do so, but Tristram had no means of knowing this, and his heart glowed with pleasure. It was evident that she cared nothing for the man with whom her name had been coupled, and he shook hands with him quite cordially when he appeared in the hall, and listened to his lecture with a fair amount of appreciation.

Lady Carlyle was waiting for them at the end of the hour, and if her face was somewhat more rigid than usual it was not noticeable in the gathering twilight. Tristram was quite content to sit silent in his corner of the carriage, the feeling of Hylda's presence was enough, the momentary cloud was cleared away and his thoughts of her were thoughts of infinite tenderness.

"You will come in and have some tea," said Mrs. Carlyle, when they reached the Manor.

Lady Carlyle began a refusal, but Hylda had looked at her cousin as he handed her out of the carriage, and he had interpreted her glance as a wish that he should stay.

"Oh, yes, mother," he said, playfully, "I shall be afraid to drive home with you if you have to wait another half-hour for your tea."

No one but Tristram ever ventured to joke with Lady Carlyle, and even from him it was rather ungraciously received; he was not disconcerted, however, by her chilly manner, and, as on the present occasion, generally managed to gain his point.

"So you have been down to your lecture again?" said a voice, as they entered the drawing-room.

It was Mr. Craven the Rector, who wanted to speak to Hylda, and had been told by Roberts that the ladies would soon be home.

Tristram was vexed; for he had hoped to secure a quiet talk with his cousin after the starvation of the past fortnight. It was impossible to show his feeling, however, and as his mother was evidently in a hurry to be gone, he would not irritate her by lingering. He handed round the cups of tea, and stood patiently listening to Mrs. Carlyle while she poured forth a flood of remarks on the projected alterations in the stables, fully conscious at the same time of all that Hylda said in answer to Mr. Craven.

A name suddenly caught his ear, to which he was at the moment peculiarly sensitive, and turning slightly he looked across at his cousin.

"I should have gone to Mr. Chesterford about it to-night," said the Rector, "but I thought that Mr. Weston would be there."

"Oh, no," said Hylda, "he is staying at the 'Black Eagle.'"

No sooner had the words passed her lips than she turned crimson, and looked round to see if her unfortunate speech had been overheard.

The good old Rector noticed nothing amiss, and talked on with benevolent complacency. Tristram had looked away again, and was waiting for his mother to rise, and Lady Carlyle bade her niece farewell in exactly her usual manner. Hylda could not tell whether she had anything to fear or not, but on the whole, she thought not, and she had so much to occupy her mind that the occurrence was soon forgotten.

But Tristram had heard; and, what was more, he had seen! He was very silent during the homeward drive, nor did his mother try to rouse him; but as soon as they had finished dinner, she summoned him to the Blue Room, and asked him to close the door carefully.

"Tristram," she said, "I have heard something very unpleasant to-day."

Tristram knew in a moment what she meant; he had done all in his power to prevent the story from coming to her ears, but to prevent a rumour from spreading is as easy a task as collecting scattered thistledown.

"I called on Mrs. Harley," she continued in a solemn tone, "and she spoke to me of an extraordinary tale that she had heard from her maid about Hylda and Mr. Weston. I silenced her at once, of course, and informed her that she little knew my niece if she thought that she would ever allow herself to be mixed up with anything of that kind. I am exceedingly sorry to be obliged to mention such a subject to you, but she is your future wife, and it is only right that you should be enabled to defend her."

Tristram listened with a strange sensation; it was the first time that his mother had so fully acknowledged his position towards Hylda, and at any other moment he would have blessed her for her words, just as he would have recognised with delight her real opinion of her niece. But now there rang again and again through his heart the words that he had heard Hylda utter, and her face of blushing confusion was continually before his eyes.

What did it all mean? Until he had satisfied himself of that, he could not enter upon any discussion of the subject with his mother.

"I have heard of this before," he said, "and have consulted with Mr. Chesterford about it. I hope that we shall speedily put an end to any gossip."

Lady Carlyle said no more, and her son went away to the library to think the matter out. But when it is the beloved of one's heart who stands at the bar, the judge becomes an advocate and the summing up of evidence turns into a passionate plea for the defence. Instead of weighing the facts judicially, Tristram found himself urging every argument in Hylda's favour that he could summon to his aid. That Mr. Weston was at the "Black Eagle" was a fact, known, doubtless, to plenty of people, and she might easily have heard it in the most natural way in the world; as for the blush, was it not possible that the late rumour had come to her knowledge, and if so would not her pure soul revolt at the very mention of his name? It was easier to

believe anything than that Hylda was otherwise than what he thought her, and when at last he joined his mother in the drawing-room the cloud had lifted from his brow, and his sleep that night was filled with happy visions.

But if Tristram had known what was passing at the Manor, his dreams would have weighed down with despair.

As soon as dinner was over Hylda made an excuse to go up to her study, and sitting there with the door ajar she listened breathlessly for the sound of the doorbell. This time she was not disappointed; it came at the very moment that she expected it; there were steps in the hall, the drawing-room door shut, and she was left to endure the beating of her heart.

The time that followed seemed an eternity to her, but in reality it was scarcely more than half-an-hour. She heard the door open at last, and her mother's step sounded on the stair; she had only just time to remember that she must not show any emotion, and hastily seating herself she took up a pen.

"Oh! my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlyle, "a most dreadful thing has happened. You will never guess!"

An observant spectator would have noticed at once that Hylda's paper was untouched and her pen undipped in the ink, that her hand was trembling and her eyes dilated with excitement; but Mrs. Carlyle saw none of these things, and she spoke irritably when Hylda did not at once reply.

"I do wish you would put away that everlasting writing," she said; "you never seem to think about anything else, and I don't know at all what to do, he won't listen to a word I say, and how I am to tell your aunt and cousin I can't think."

"What is the matter?" asked Hylda, regaining her composure as she saw how completely her mother had lost hers.

"That is just what I have been telling you, only you never will listen to a word I say. Mr. Weston is here, he came soon after you went upstairs, and he has been going

on in the most extraordinary way. He says that he will never be content unless he is allowed to marry you. I told him that you were going to be married to Tristram, but even that did not stop him! He must be mad, I suppose."

"I shall never be married to Tristram," said Hylda, calmly.

She knew that she must take a decided line from the first, if the matter was ever to be carried through; but she had become so used to her own decisions that she was hardly prepared for its effect upon her mother.

Mrs. Carlyle stared at her daughter in utter bewilderment and dismay.

"Not marry Tristram!" she gasped. "But you have always led him to believe that you would."

"Tristram has taken it for granted," said Hylda. "I have made him no promises."

"But why did you let him take it for granted?" said Mrs. Carlyle. "And it is not only Tristram, everyone thinks the same thing. I am sure I always looked upon it as settled; and as for your aunt——"

"My aunt will be delighted," interrupted Hylda; "she never could bear the thought of it."

"That is just the worst part!" said Mrs. Carlyle, letting her feelings escape in an angry sob. "She will be so triumphant in that icy way of hers that I shall never be able to look her in the face again; and it is all your fault!"

"We must not forget that Mr. Weston is downstairs," said Hylda, who was all impatience to bring the discussion back to the main point.

"I know he is; but what are we to say to him? I feel perfectly distracted!" and, casting herself into a chair, Mrs. Carlyle wept aloud.

Hylda stood looking at her despairingly; she was longing to know what had passed between her mother and Mr. Weston, but it seemed impossible to get at any connected account of the interview.

"Did you tell Mr. Weston that you would fetch me?" she asked, at last.

"Yes, oh! yes," sobbed Mrs. Carlyle, becoming quite



hysterical, "I said you would tell him yourself that it was out of the question; I can't see him again."

"Very well," said Hylda, who had been hoping for this climax all along; "I will go down and speak to him; we cannot let him wait there indefinitely."

"Oh! but you cannot go; it will be so awkward for you," and Mrs. Carlyle tried to rise, but fell back again, shaking in every limb.

"All you can do is to stay where you are!" said Hylda. "I will go down and see him, and you can stop here with your fan and your smelling-bottle."

She waited for no further remonstrances: but, having given her mother a cushion, a footstool, and some Eau-de-Cologne, she left her to recover, and flew downstairs to the drawing-room.

Hylda had taken no time to decide what she should say; but there was no need for consideration. Mr. Weston was pacing the room with impatient strides; and almost before she had closed the door behind her, he had her in his arms.

"Why have you kept me waiting all this time?" he said. "Tell me at once what you mean by it."

The words were harsh, but the tone was tender and playful, masterful and entreating, all at once; Hylda's pent-up feeling rushed forth as she heard it, and she clung to him without attempting a reply. He led her to the sofa, and they sat down together in silence.

"But we must discuss things, you know!" she said, at last, looking up at him with a smile.

"Why should we?" he answered. "I am much too happy to discuss anything. You don't know how I have longed for you, my darling, since I parted from you that night under the umbrella! Tell me how much you have longed for me."

The question took some time to answer, and Mr. Weston would have gone on to others equally difficult and equally delightful; but Hylda had too vivid a remembrance of her mother's condition to be put off altogether.

"I shall have to go upstairs again in a few minutes," she said. "Mother thinks that I am sending you away, and that you are trying to soften my cruel refusal!"

He laughed complacently ; the contrast between the supposition and the reality was delicious. "What are you going to say to her, when I let you go?" he asked.

"I must undeceive her, I suppose."

"Yes, you must ; and the sooner it is done the better. I think I shall come with you."

Hylda did not feel sure that her mother would approve of this arrangement ; but it was much easier to do what Mr. Weston wished than to gainsay him ; and there was no doubt that his presence would be a great assistance ; so they went upstairs together.

Soothed by her many appliances, Mrs. Carlyle had nearly dropped off to sleep, and when the door opened she started up with an exclamation. It had never struck her that Hylda would do anything but send the unwelcome suitor away ; and, when he was actually ushered into the room, she could only suppose that she was under the influence of some dreadful dream.

"What does this mean ?" she said, looking from one to the other, in dismay.

"It means that your daughter has been good enough to listen to my love," said Mr. Weston, easily, "and she has promised to become my wife."

"But I explained to you that it could not be !" said poor Mrs. Carlyle, her tears breaking out again.

"I know you did ; and yet, after all, you see it has come about."

Mrs. Carlyle looked at him helplessly ; she was easily worsted in an argument, although it was almost impossible to make her alter her opinions, and she had no hope of convincing Mr. Weston of the futility of his scheme.

"You must not think that I am doing this inconsiderately," he said, assuming the earnest tone that Hylda knew so well. "I am quite aware of the troubles and difficulties that will have to be faced, and I am ready to face them. But the fact is, that when two people are all the world to each other, it makes no difference if all the world lies between them ; somehow or other they will come together !"

"That is all very well," said Mrs. Carlyle, "but what am I to say at the Court ?"

She spoke in a piteous tone, and Mr. Weston could hardly forbear a smile.

"You do not think that I am going to leave you to make my explanations?" he said. "I shall see Sir Tristram Carlyle to-morrow morning and tell him that I am engaged to your daughter, and I will promise to meet all his objections so that you shall have no trouble in the matter."

He spoke in a tone of consideration, almost of affection, and it had its effect upon Mrs. Carlyle. She was in a state of such utter bewilderment that she was ready to catch at anything for support, and the relief of feeling that all the responsibility would be lifted off her shoulders, prevented her from realising that by so doing Mr. Weston was pledging her to consent. Hylda saw what he was doing quickly enough, but she felt nothing but admiration for his powers of generalship.

"I think I had better go now," he said; "it is getting late, and I am sure you need rest."

Unwilling as he was to leave Hylda, he felt that it would be risking everything to discuss the matter further; having gained a tacit approval from Mrs. Carlyle he was not going to give her time to rescind it.

"Good-night," he said, "I shall come to you to-morrow as soon as I have seen your nephew. We always seem to be in an emergency when we meet in this room, but we got off safely last time, and we shall do so again."

He made the allusion with a purpose, for remembering how Mrs. Carlyle had leaned upon him in her terror he wanted to awaken the same strain of thought in her mind. In this he was quite successful, for no sooner had he taken his departure than Hylda, who had been expecting a storm of reproaches, was amazed by her mother's remarking: "He certainly knows how to manage things wonderfully well."

\*The words were all she needed to unlock her heart, and she poured forth such a flood of rapture that Mrs. Carlyle was touched in spite of herself. As Mr. Weston had said, of what use is it to try to prevent people from coming together when they are made for one another?

But it was not so much the thought of Hylda's happiness that gratified her as the satisfaction she felt in the thought

that Harriet would see at last that she was not so all-important as she deemed herself. Although in giving up Tristram, Hylda was giving up the brilliancy of her prospects, still she was at the same time asserting her independence, and Harriet would find herself in the unwonted position of rejected instead of rejecting. There was something very cheering in this, and Mrs. Carlyle slept better that night than might have been expected after such an upheaval of her plans.

Mr. Weston's card was brought in to Sir Tristram the next morning as he was leaving the breakfast-room. He felt an unpleasant sensation as he read it, and his face was stern when he greeted his visitor and his manner cold; but Mr. Weston was not at all abashed: there is nothing like the consciousness of success to buoy one up against depreciation, and he could afford to be generous to a disappointed rival.

"I am afraid that what I have to say will not be very acceptable," he began, "but there is no good in keeping it back. I have come over here by Mrs. Carlyle's desire to tell you that I am engaged to her daughter."

Tristram's heart gave a sickening leap, and all the blood in his body seemed to concentrate itself in one burning spot in his brain; but he showed no outward sign of his emotion. Whatever happened, he would give his enemy no occasion to triumph over him.

"This must no doubt seem rather sudden," went on Mr. Weston, "but I suppose it is the old story of love at first sight! I told Mrs. Carlyle that I would come over this morning and break the news to you, for she did not like to do so herself."

Tristram bit his lip. If one thing about this man was more offensive to him than another, it was the tinge of pity that he infused into his communication. \*

"What Mrs. Carlyle has to say on the matter, I shall give her an opportunity of saying to myself," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly; "in the meantime, you must remember that, as head of the family, I stand in the place of Miss Carlyle's guardian, and you must allow me to ask you a few questions."

Mr. Weston did not reply for a moment. He had no objection to lay a statement of his affairs before anyone; but what he did object to was that Sir Tristram should assume this air of superiority, when all the while he must be smarting from an inward wound. To have won Hylda's love was a great achievement; but to make this proud aristocrat writhe at the knowledge would be even greater!

Sir Tristram, however, had no idea of affording him this gratification. The rest of his life would be long enough for his own suffering; for the present he must think only of Hylda's welfare. Whatever Mrs. Carlyle might have said and done, he felt himself bound to make every investigation, and to use every means in his power to open his cousin's eyes; she would say, no doubt, that it was jealousy on his part, but that he must bear. He was already shaping his expostulations in his mind, and did not notice how long it was before Mr. Weston spoke again.

"I am willing to answer any questions that Mrs. Carlyle chooses to put to me," he said at last; "but you must understand that she has given her unreserved consent."

"There is no need, then, to prolong the present interview," said Sir Tristram, rising from his chair. He felt that his strength was giving way, and that he must get rid of his visitor without delay.

"Very well," said Mr. Weston. "I am going back to get some lunch at the Manor before I return to town. Can I give them any message from you?"

"I shall see them myself later on," said Tristram, swallowing down the angry words that rose to his lips. "I shall write to you to night."

"Oh, certainly!" said Mr. Weston. "Hylda has my address."

It was, perhaps, a good thing that the footman opened the door at that moment, in answer to his master's ring. Sir Tristram signed to him to show the visitor out, and bowing to Mr. Weston, without offering him his hand, he went through the library to his small inner study, and locked the door behind him.

The remembrance of that hour remained with him to

the end of his life, bitten into his heart by the poisoned anguish that thrilled through every nerve and fibre. It was not his own personal grief that pained him most sorely, that would come by and by; it was not even the sense that Hylda had deceived and deluded him, but the horrible realisation that he must stand by and hear others blame her.

He looked at his watch at last, and found that it was still only twelve o'clock; he could not go to the Manor until Mr. Weston should have taken his departure, and still less could he sit down to luncheon with his mother. He ordered his horse, therefore, and mounted and rode away with a terrible weight at his heart, galloping down one lonely road after another until he and his steed were alike wearied out, and arrived spent and worn at their destination.

He had expected that Hylda would keep away from him, but, to his surprise, she came directly to the room into which he had been shown. Mrs. Carlyle had declared that she could not meet her nephew until his first indignation had blown over, but Hylda was of a different nature from her mother, and it was easier to her to know the worst at once.

She had made up her mind to take the initiative, and she began to speak as soon as she entered the room.

"I know that you have cause to say that I have treated you badly," she began, "and I want to ask you to forgive me before I say anything else."

A flood of feeling rose up in Tristram's heart and checked his utterance. It was a fearful ordeal to be brought face to face with the one who was dearer to him than all the world beside, knowing that she had passed for ever out of his reach; but it was neither anger nor grief that overwhelmed him for the moment. If Mr. Weston's words had cut him to the quick, Hylda's seemed like vinegar poured into an open wound. They all seemed to imagine that he had no thought except for himself; that he was such a monster of selfishness that his own pain was the only sensation that he was capable of feeling; his mood might be unreasoning, but it was none the less real, and

Hylda had never seen such a look upon his face as that which crossed it now. Naturally enough, she misunderstood it.

"I know that you have every right to be angry with me," she said; "and, as I said before, I can only ask you to forgive me; I wish I could have saved you from this pain, but——"

"Hylda," he interrupted sternly, "be silent a moment, and listen to me. My pain is sacred, even from you, therefore we will not allude to it. It is of you that I must speak. I have seen Mr. Weston this morning, and have told him that I should come to see you and your mother. You have entered lightly into this engagement, but at present I am your protector, and it is my duty to seek some guarantee of this man's character and position."

Hylda's eyes flamed with sudden passion. She was quite ready to humble herself before Tristram's just resentment, but when he flung her apologies back in her teeth and presumed to attack her lover, a very different spirit took possession of her.

"Mr. Weston's position speaks for itself," she said proudly; "and as for his character—I love him!"

She looked defiantly at her cousin as she spoke; all her compassion had deserted her, and she was careless what wounds she might inflict.

"All the same, I shall feel myself bound to make enquiries," he said. "Of course you do not know it, but Mr. Weston's social standing is very different from your own. I have heard on trustworthy testimony that his father keeps a shop."

"But I do know it!" she said, with a touch of scorn; "he has told me all about himself. He is far too noble to be ashamed of it. His father is a grocer at Yarmouth, and Richard loves him dearly!"

Tristram looked at her bewildered; things had gone to greater lengths than he had imagined, and he felt his difficulties becoming thicker with every moment.

"It is not only Mr. Weston's birth that I must refer to," he said. "You are very young as yet, and it is my duty to speak plainly. He has used his opportunities in

an unjustifiable manner, and has even caused you to be talked about by the way in which he has behaved."

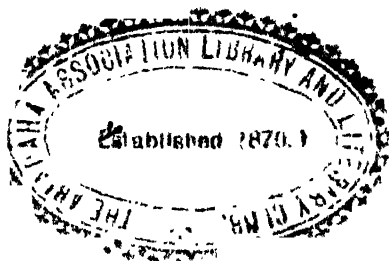
He looked at her almost fearfully as he spoke. No means were too rude if he might awaken her from her delusion, but he felt that this was a strong measure. But the result was not what he had anticipated.

"I suppose we were seen coming home from the lecture together," said Hylda, calmly; "but what harm was there in that? You may say what you like, Tristram, it is no use; Richard and I love one another, and there is an end of it. Mamma has given her consent, and though, of course, you can try and upset her if you like, we mean to hold her to her promise!"

Tristram gave a sigh of despair. He might have charged her with deception and duplicity, but what good was it to continue the argument? She was evidently impervious to all that he could say, and the only thing to be done was to try and guard her as far as possible from the consequences of her folly.

"You should not speak to me as though I were your enemy," he said sadly; "I desire nothing but your happiness, and I would give all I have to secure it. Let me see your mother now; you need not be afraid of anything that I shall say to her."

Hylda left the room without another word, and so the interview ended.





## CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. CARLYLE made no difficulty about writing a letter to Mr. Weston, under her nephew's dictation. She was so relieved to find that he did not reproach her for what had happened that she was ready to submit to whatever he enjoined, and even managed to remember that she was not to speak of the engagement until a satisfactory answer had been received.

The answer was not long in coming. Mr. Weston wrote by return of post, giving a plain and straightforward account of his affairs; it was quite clear that he was well able to maintain a wife, and there was nothing to urge against his plea for a speedy marriage. Tristram knew that his fate was sealed so soon as he read the letter, and he set himself at once to the task that lay before him.

The first thing to be done was to break the news to his mother, and, much as he dreaded the task, he would not entrust it to anyone else; a great deal depended upon the way in which Lady Carlyle regarded the matter, and though Hylda had deserted him, he was still prepared to act as her defender.

Lady Carlyle was enshrined in the Blue Room when Tristram returned from talking over the matter with his aunt, and thither he at once proceeded. She was reading a severe-looking calf-bound volume, and she raised her eyes with some annoyance at the interruption.

"I have something particular to say to you, mother," he said, taking a seat with his back to the window, and shading his face with his hand.

She showed that she accepted the excuse by folding her

hands on the open page, but she said nothing to help him out.

There was no use in any preamble, and he went straight to the point, with the words, "Hylda is engaged to Mr. Weston."

Lady Carlyle started, and looked at him fixedly.

"Then that gossip was not ill-founded after all," she said.

Tristram winced; accustomed as he was to his mother's ways, he could not be indifferent to her habit of touching at once upon any sore spot.

"There is more excuse for her than you think," he said, rushing instinctively to her defence. "Whatever we may think of Mr. Weston, there is no doubt that he has a power of fascination; Hylda has been led on without realising what she was doing."

Lady Carlyle removed her hands from her book while he was speaking, and appeared to read; it was a way she had when she did not wish to express an opinion, and some of her friends found it exasperating. But there was something else that Tristram had to say, and he was obliged to persevere.

"It will rest a great deal with us," he said, "whether unpleasant remarks are made or not. I have done all in my power to dissuade Hylda, but it is too late now for any arguments, and under the circumstances we must be careful to show that we recognise the engagement."

Lady Carlyle looked up coldly. "I do not quite understand you, Tristram," she remarked; "you do not approve of the match, and yet you wish it recognised."

Sir Tristram was very loyal to his mother, but there were times when he wished that she could be other than what she was. He knew that her present coldness was only the result of her wounded pride and affection, and that she loved him so intensely that she could not bear to see his pain; but fully as he realised this, he longed just now for a mother such as he had read of—a mother full of love and tenderness, upon whose breast he might have laid his head, and felt her compassion soothing him, even if it could not heal.

Lady Carlyle was true as steel, but she was about as likely to draw him into her arms and soothe him as a statue would have been; however, she possessed an excellent judgment, and, with a sigh, he set himself to the difficult task of convincing it.

"When I say that I do not approve of the match," he said, "I do not mean that there is anything actually against Mr. Weston. He is not well born, but he has raised himself into an honourable position by his own talents, and everyone of whom I have enquired gives him a high character. If we hold aloof it will make things very awkward for Hylda, besides——" His voice faltered, and he stopped.

Lady Carlyle could have been deaf to all his arguments, but that one broken word pierced through all her defences. If people talked against Hylda it would be a very suitable punishment for her, but if by their talk they added one pang to Tristram's wound they must be silenced once and for all. But even though she agreed, it was impossible for her to do so graciously.

"If it is necessary to keep up appearances, it shall be done," she said; "but you must understand that it is no more than an appearance. Neither Cecilia nor her daughter can ever again be regarded as worthy of esteem."

The subject was not renewed between them that day, but Lady Carlyle was not forgetful of promises once made, and on the next afternoon she ordered the carriage, and drove over to the Manor to administer her congratulations.

She had intended to find Hylda and her mother sitting together in the drawing-room, and to make them withe before her while she told them her opinion of them in finely-veiled terms; but, unfortunately for her scheme, Mrs. Carlyle was alone, and from the window she could see two figures making their way down the wintry garden.

"Is that Mr. Weston!" she exclaimed, stopping short and gazing at them with a look that matched the frosty sky outside.

"Yes," said Mrs. Carlyle, gathering herself out of her low chair with some difficulty, and resolving to show her hardihood at once. "He is a fine-looking man, is he not?"

"I have seen him before," returned Lady Carlyle. "I was merely surprised that he should be here again so soon."

"Were you?" said Cecilia, with an air that implied that it was nothing to her whether her sister-in-law was surprised or not. "I think it is quite natural that he should want to come down again as soon as possible."

Harriet glanced at her quickly; this independence must be crushed, and the sooner she did it the better.

"No doubt it is natural," she said; "in fact, it is exactly what I should have expected from him. You seem to forget that both he and Hylda have acted in a very unbecoming way."

Cecilia looked up in alarm; her little pretence of courage was swept away in a moment. She saw that the indignation that Tristram had forborne to express was to be launched upon her now in a double tide, and she trembled as much as her sister-in-law could possibly have desired.

"I don't know what you mean by unbecoming," she said, trying to rally her spirits a little.

"Very possibly not!" remarked Harriet, bitingly. "Our views of what is becoming are apt to be different. But I should have thought that any right-minded person would have felt that it was very wrong for a girl to carry on an understanding with one man while she was as good as engaged to another."

"That is a very unfair way of putting it," exclaimed Mrs. Carlyle, delighted to find—as she thought—that Harriet had laid herself open to attack by going beyond the truth. "Of course I can quite understand that you are vexed at Tristram's disappointment, but there was no actual engagement. And as for Mr. Weston, I can only say that he has acted in the most open way: he came to me first to tell me of his wishes, and as soon as he had gained my consent, he went over to see Tristram."

Though Lady Carlyle despised her sister-in-law, she had a certain amount of feeling for her, and when she set out on her expedition she had resolved not to reveal what she had heard respecting Hylda's duplicity. If Cecilia knew it, her pain would be great enough without any addition; and

if she did not know it, mercy demanded that she should be left in ignorance.

But in making this resolution, she had not foreseen that Cecilia would have the insolence to condole with her on her son's disappointment; it roused her ire to the utmost, and she caught at any weapon that came nearest.

"There are occasions when disappointment is the happiest thing," she said, "and it is certainly so in this case. I was never in favour of a marriage between Tristram and Hylda, but I see now what an escape he has had. You talk of Mr. Weston's open conduct, and for your sake I am glad you should believe in it, but everyone else knows perfectly well that there has been a secret understanding going on for weeks; they have been seen walking together, and they met at Miss Elton's house, and——" but here the door opened, and Hylda and Mr. Weston walked into the room.

Whatever qualities Richard Weston might be lacking in, he was certainly not deficient in courage. His coolness no doubt arose partly from his good opinion of himself, but he was never behindhand when difficulty or danger were to be faced. He had seen the carriage from the Court drive in as they left the house, and he had been spending his time in urging Hylda to let him go and charge the enemy.

Hylda's objections were not made because she thought him wanting in courage, but because she dreaded the effects of an encounter between him and her aunt. She knew that he would not have the slightest idea of submitting to Lady Carlyle's strictures; and, feeling that her own conduct had not been above reproach, she wanted to avoid an open collision.

"I think we had better let them fight it out alone," she said; "they are so used to quarrelling that a little more will make no difference."

"Like many other good old ladies," said Richard laughing, "they hate one another, but only in a Christian way! Still, when they are quarrelling over *you*, I would rather be in it."

"That is just what I want to prevent," said Hylda.

"If you joined in, you might say things that would never be forgotten."

"I very probably might!" said Richard complacently. "If I hear anyone abuse you I shall make them repent it. I possess the exclusive right to ill-treat you, remember that!"

Such speeches charmed Hylda far more than any outpourings of tenderness could have done, and she responded with a smile that put all thoughts of the battle out of his head for a little while; but his pertinacity was not easily overcome, and he soon returned to the subject again, with the result that Hylda at last gave way and they returned to the house together.

The moment of their arrival was an unfortunate one for Lady Carlyle, and she looked as uncomfortable as it was in her nature to look; but whereas most people under the circumstances would have been hot and confused, she only showed her discomfort by appearing more frigid than ever.

She bowed to Mr. Weston and held out a cold, kid finger to Hylda, while Mrs. Carlyle, who was torn with anxiety and mortification, looked from one to the other with dismay.

Mr. Weston, however, was quite equal to the occasion.

"I proposed to Hylda that we should come in," he said, "because I felt certain that your first meeting with Mrs. Carlyle would not be a very agreeable one. This engagement has come as a surprise to everyone, I know; but, like other nine days' wonders, it will soon seem the most natural thing in the world."

Lady Carlyle was so taken aback by his coolness that she could not speak, and he went on composedly:

"I heard what you were saying as I came in. I must add a word on that point. I know how gossip runs rife in country towns like this, but I cannot imagine how so much can have been made out of the fact that Hylda and I happened to pay a call on Miss Elton at the same time, or even out of the fact that I caught her up on the way home and sheltered her under my umbrella. It is rather absurd, is it not, when one comes to look at it calmly? But such

little storms in tempests are necessary to make existence endurable in these dead-alive places."

If there was one thing in the world that Lady Carlyle set her face against more steadfastly than another it was gossip and tittle-tattle; and as Hylda listened, she felt that Richard could have said nothing more calculated to widen the breach between them. And yet, though she feared the consequences, and though she knew that his remarks were no more than a clever gloss of the truth, she could not help admiring him for his courage. To dare to charge her formidable aunt with gossiping seemed to her nothing less than sublime.

But, to Hylda's surprise, the charge was received in a way that she had not expected. Men like Mr. Weston had not entered into Lady Carlyle's experience before; her husband had been entirely under her control, and, though Tristram knew how to make himself respected, his filial feeling, as well as his natural courtesy, prevented his rule from being apparent. But Mr. Weston's nature was not one to brook restraint from any woman, and his virile force was veiled under no grace of manner; Lady Carlyle felt instinctively that she could not stand up against him, and she was so unaccustomed to yield that the feeling was all the more overwhelming when it came. Her opinion of Mr. Weston was not altered, but she could not disguise from herself that she had found her match, and her dislike of him increased in proportion to her respect.

"It will scarcely be profitable to discuss the matter any further," she said. "If you will ring the bell, Hylda, I will ask for my carriage."

Everyone was glad when she had gone, but Mr. Weston's sense of triumph outweighed any awkwardness that he might have felt; he had discomfited his enemy, and having been victorious in such an encounter as this, he had no difficulty in silencing the doubts and fears that Lady Carlyle's words had aroused in her sister-in-law's mind.

Mrs. Carlyle was only too willing to believe that Harriet was in the wrong, and by the time that she and her future son-in-law had joined in a duet of abuse, her faith in him was completely restored.

"I have never been so insulted in my life before!" said Lady Carlyle, when she and Tristram were alone that evening.

Tristram sighed; his own afternoon had not been a particularly pleasant one, for he had felt it his duty to go to Mr. Chesterford himself to announce his cousin's engagement. It was only right to give him a proper explanation after what had happened, but it was not easy to do it, and between his endeavours to speak the truth, and his desire to shield Hylda as far as possible, he had found much trouble in framing his sentences.

Mr. Chesterford was sympathetic and kind, but Tristram could not divest himself of the belief that he was secretly triumphing in the veracity of Emma Jennings, and he was glad to get away. He had intended to write a note to Miss Elton, but something in the remembrance of the little schoolmistress's honest glance made him pause when he reached Stow House, and after a moment's hesitation he rang the bell.

The girls were busy rehearsing for their Christmas concert; and in the midst of a pause in the music, while Miss Elton stood before them, bâton in hand, energetically denouncing their shortcomings, the maid entered, and said in tones of excusable excitement, "Sir Tristram Carlyle is in the drawing-room, ma'am."

Miss Elton handed the bâton to Miss Billing and went out. The December day was closing in, and the gas had not been lighted in the room where Tristram stood; she could not see his face, but his voice when he spoke was weary and lifeless.

"After the conversation that we had when I called upon you," he said, "I thought that I would come and tell you myself the news of my cousin's engagement to Mr. Weston."

Miss Elton gave a little start. Like every other inhabitant of Stowbury, she had expected to hear of Sir Tristram's own engagement, and she felt that there was more in his announcement than met the ear. She hardly knew how to reply, but though she could boast of no Norman blood she had the kind heart and the simple faith that sometimes



more than makes up for its absence. Quick as thought she asked herself how she would wish to be treated if she were in like case, and acting on her instant decision she looked up at him and answered earnestly :

"It is very kind of you to have come to tell me. Miss Carlyle is a sweet girl, and I believe that Mr. Weston is worthy of her, and therefore I feel sure that they will be very happy."

It was the first cordial word that had been uttered, and Tristram felt a lump rise in his throat that prevented him from replying. He held out his hand and shook Miss Elton's warmly, and they parted with a mutual feeling of regard.

Miss Elton was much too discreet to give any account of the interview, but walls have ears, and eyes into the bargain, and Tristram's sadness might have been lightened by a smile if he had known that before Stow House sank into its nightly repose, the three governesses, the fifteen boarders, and the five servants had all discussed the possibility of an attachment between Miss Elton and himself, and that Miss Brown and Fraülein Hollman had had a serious quarrel over the dresses that they should wear at the wedding. If Miss Carlyle was going to marry Mr. Weston it was natural that Sir Tristram should seek consolation ; Stowbury Court would be a delightful place to visit at, and the only blot in the whole fair picture was Fraülein Hollman's determination that the bridesmaids should wear pale blue when she knew that Miss Brown looked ten times better in pink.

But Tristram did not know of their castle in the air, and he had nothing to relieve his depression as he sat behind his newspaper that evening and watched his mother's iron-bound countenance. She had relapsed into silence after giving him her views on the arrangements for the wedding, and he thought, as he looked at her, that her silence was even more expressive than her words.

Tristram was in a strange state of mind at this time. He had received a blow that threatened to shatter his whole life ; but like a man wounded on the battlefield he would not leave his post until his duty should be done.

Till the wedding was over he must keep a brave front to the world, do his part as head of the family, listen to congratulations, receive visitors, plan the details of the ceremony, give his cousin away, and then—what would come after he did not care to guess!

The sooner the strain came to an end the better. He was quite ready to fall in with Mr. Weston's wishes. It was intolerable to be thrown into such close contact with his rival and to be continually jarred by his want of the finer susceptibilities. But what tried him still more were the conversations he was obliged to hold with his cousin. Hylda knew nothing about money matters, and would have been quite content to trust everything to Richard; but this Tristram would not allow; and he insisted that the two hundred a year which she possessed in her own right should be put in trust for her.

Mr. Weston did not openly object; but he told Hylda that it was very absurd, and that since they were to belong to one another, their possessions would henceforth be in common, that divisions bred distrust, and other remarks of the same kind, which filled Hylda with resentment, not against her lover, but against her cousin. She said all that she dared to Tristram on her own account, but some instinctive feeling kept her from disclosing the fact that Richard was dissatisfied. For her part, she could quite understand his objections; he loved her so much that he could not bear to feel there was the slightest shadow between them, and she should have felt just the same if she had been in his place; but she knew that Tristram would not understand, and therefore she kept silence.

The wedding was fixed for the end of March, and even Hylda felt it as some kind of relief when news arrived from Yarmouth that one of Mr. Weston's sisters had scarlet fever, and that none of the family would be able to be present. She was quite prepared to like them herself, but she felt that it would not be a favourable opportunity to begin to like them when they were exposed to the galling fire of Lady Carlyle's criticism. A cousin of Richard's, who was a solicitor in London, undertook to come down, and two of his college friends were also ready to support

him. These, with a few Carlyle relations, made up a fair number of wedding guests; and the inhabitants of Stowbury and the neighbourhood were sure to supply plenty of spectators.

Tristram went through all the preparations like one in a dream. He had looked forward to this spring as the time when his own hopes would be crowned with fulfilment, and there were moments when he felt as though he should wake out of this hideous nightmare and find that it was his own happiness and not another man's that was drawing nearer day by day.

He had certainly had his wish of smoothing things over for Hylda. The way in which he continually wrote and spoke of the engagement had succeeded in calming people's curiosity; and even Jock Chesterford, when he came down for the Christmas vacation, was not allowed to express any surprise, though he insisted on expressing his disgust.

Mrs. Carlyle, in her relief at the assistance he gave her, seemed to have forgotten that he had anything to forgive; and as for Hylda, she scarcely thought of him at all; she, too, was in a dream, but her dream was one of delicious rapture. Only his mother knew what he was enduring; and, as she showed her sympathy by disapproving of everything he said and did, it was difficult to feel grateful for it.

"Your cousin must be a very cold-blooded sort of being," said Richard, one day, just before the wedding, when he and Tristram had been going over the final arrangements together. "If I had seen you carried off by another man I should have spent all my time in putting bullets into him!"

"Ah! but then you love me!" said Hylda.

"And you think he did not?"

"No; I think he only liked me; and there is as much difference between love and liking as there is between——" She paused, unable to find a comparison.

"As there is between genius and talent," said Richard.

"Yes," she said. "How well you express things! You will have to teach me a great deal after we are married."

"I shan't have time," said Richard. "I shall be so busy loving you."

"But that is not reasonable," said Hylda.

"Well, I don't pretend to be reasonable in my love for you."

"You mean that it is unreasonable to love me?"

"Don't twist my words. I shall invent horrible punishments for you, if you are dense and mistake my meaning."

Hylda nestled up against him with a smile. It seemed to her that she should never get tired of talking to Richard. The only wonder was that he should like to talk to her, when he was so clever, and had seen and done so much. She told him so more than once; but he only silenced her with a kiss; in reality he thought that the condescension was all on his side, but he could not very well tell her so.

"I like to talk to you, because you appreciate what I say," he replied, when she pressed him for a reason; "and when you have seen a little more of the world you will understand things as well as appreciate them."

"You have turned the future into gold for me," said Hylda; "and it all looked so grey and leaden before you came. I never thought that life could hold such happiness; it will be roses all the way."

"But you must expect thorns too," said Richard. "You can't have roses without them."

"Oh! yes, I can," said Hylda, pouting; "you will have to strip the thorns off the roses before you give them to me."

"You are a little darling!" he said.

There was a silence, and then Hylda spoke again.

"Is it not wonderful," she said, "that I should not be afraid to give myself to you, when I have known you such a little time. I had known Tristram so long, and yet I never felt as though I could look forward to living with him, even though he is so good."

"Good!" said Richard, contemptuously. "He has one great fault, he never does anything wrong! I hate copy-book virtues."

Hylda felt a little hurt for her cousin's sake, but she did

not pursue the subject ; she had far too much to think of just now to trouble herself about Tristram, and his pale, set face was unnoticed by her when they met on the wedding morning.

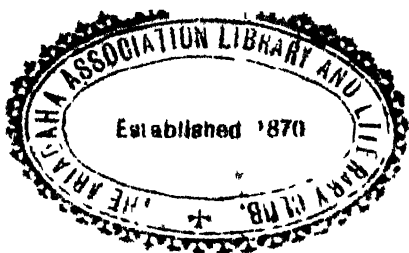
He did his part well, receiving the guests, giving away the bride, and walking down the church with Mrs. Carlyle on his arm, all in a flutter of lace and agitation. It was a different bridal procession that had figured in his dreams, and a different figure that had walked by his side, but that thought was sternly crushed back into silence, and he went through his duties with unmoved composure.

The regulation speeches were made, and the regulation flowers thrown ; flags waved, handkerchiefs fluttered, Nelson managed to achieve an attack of hysterics, farewells were said, the carriage drove away, and Tristram forced himself to go back into the drawing-room, and begin a polite conversation with Mr. Weston's friends.

But Lady Carlyle had been watching him, and as soon as possible she ordered their carriage to come round. Tristram made no demur. The play was played out. He might take off his mask at last, and creep away into the merciful darkness.

Not a word was spoken during the dreary drive ; but when they alighted at the Court, and Lady Carlyle saw her son's face, white and sunken above his wedding attire, she turned towards him and spoke with a sudden passion thrilling through her stern voice.

"Tristram," she said, "I forgive her ; but I never wish to see her face again !"



## CHAPTER X.

It is quite a mistake to suppose that the approach of spring is only visible to dwellers in the country. In London, too, the air grows soft, buds swell and open, and sparrows build; life takes on a milder aspect, dense fogs and grim skies are put away with other sad memories of the past, and the spring wind dances over the city.

May had come. There was a scent of the country in London streets. Hampstead gardens were gay with flowers, and St. John's Wood had broken out into leaf. The trees that lined Bective Avenue stood in a mist of green, and the square patch of grass, intersected with flower-beds, in front of Beryl Villa made a brave show. Everything in the house was new. New paper, new paint, new curtains and carpets, new chairs and tables. There was not a speck of dust anywhere, and Hylda thought that the trials of London housekeeping had been ridiculously exaggerated.

It was only a week since they had returned from their wedding journey. Florence and Rome had been visited by Hylda for the first time; but she remembered nothing beyond a vague delirium of bliss. Never before in her life had she found herself in a perfectly sympathetic atmosphere. The person she loved best in the world was always at her side, attentive to her every wish, full of admiration for all she said and did, and ready to respond to the romantic fervours with which her heart overflowed. She was reluctant to come back to everyday life again; but though the lectures were over for the present, Richard had literary work on hand that necessitated his return to London, and when April drew to a close they set their faces homeward.

"How do you like it?" asked Richard, as he ushered Hylda into her new abode.

"It looks lovely!" she answered.

Most men, under the circumstances, would have had a vivid realisation of the contrast between the home to which Hylda had been accustomed, and that to which she was now being introduced. But this view of the matter did not enter Richard's mind. Stowbury, as he remembered it, was dull and gloomy, without cheerful society or sunny skies; while Beryl Villa was alive with light and animation, and the change seemed to him entirely for the better. Hylda was not inclined to disagree with him; at present her wish had been fulfilled of finding all roses and no thorns, and she looked back on her old life with a shudder. The little drawing-room and dining-room, the tiny room behind for Richard's study, the small but prettily-furnished bedrooms, all these were delightful to her after the somewhat dreary rooms at the Manor. It seemed to her the dearest little doll's house she had ever seen, and to live in it would be a perpetual picnic.

"I am so glad that you will not have any more lectures until October," she said, as they sat together after dinner; "it would have been dreadful if you had had to go away all the time. But now you will be here all day long, and I can come into your study and see how you are getting on whenever I like."

"That is a delightful programme," said Richard; "but I am afraid we shall not be able to carry it out exactly, even though I have no lectures. I found some letters for me just now, and one of them contains an offer that I can't very well refuse. You remember that friend of mine, Ralph Rhodes, whom I told you about? Well, he's the sub-editor of the *Monthly Review*, and he wants me to take his place while he goes to South Africa on business. It is a first-rate chance for me!"

He looked at his wife, expecting to see an answering enthusiasm in her face, but to his astonishment her eyes were full of tears.

"What is the matter, darling?" he exclaimed.

She turned, and clung to him passionately. "Oh,

Richard, must you go away every day and leave me ? " she cried ; " it seems too hard, just as we have got into our little house. I don't think I can let you go ! "

" It is very sweet to think that you want me so much, " said Richard, " but I must not let this opportunity slip. You want me to succeed, don't you ? "

" Oh, yes, you know I do ! But can't you stop with me and succeed, too ? "

Richard only kissed her ; he was ready to pet her as much as she desired, but he had no thought of giving in to her entreaties ; his tenderness prevented her from feeling sore at his refusal to listen to her, but only a day or two passed by before another question arose between them.

" I shall not have to begin going to the office until next week, " said Richard one day, " so I think it would be a good plan to go down to Yarmouth on Friday and stay till Monday. It is quite time that I took you to see the old people. "

Hylda did not answer at once ; she knew that this would have to come sooner or later, but what had seemed quite natural and easy before her marriage appeared to her now in rather different colours ; the opposition of her relations had had a stimulating effect upon her, and now that it was removed she was conscious of a certain flatness. Richard was still the centre of all her thoughts and desires, but she shrank from seeing him placed at any disadvantage, and she wished that the ordeal had not been forced upon her quite so soon.

" I thought that perhaps we might have gone to the Manor for Sunday, " she said.

Richard looked up quickly. " I shall not be in any hurry to go to Stowbury, " he said, with a harshness in his voice that she had never heard before. " Your people have not been so cordial to me that I care to have much to do with them. Besides, as I said before, it is quite time that you were introduced to my parents, and I shall write at once and say that we are coming. "

He pushed back his chair as he spoke, and walked across the room without another word, but Hylda hastened after



him with a face of dismay, and clasped his arm.

"Richard! Richard!" she cried. "Do not speak to me so!"

He stopped, and looked at her coldly, but the sight of her sweet face upturned to his softened his mood, and he touched her flushed cheek caressingly.

"Silly child!" he said. "Did you think I was angry with you?"

"I didn't *think* it," she said, laying her head against his shoulder; "you *were* angry."

"No, I was not angry; I was hurt. You know how much my parents want to see you, and it seemed to me unkind of you not to wish to go." "

This was not quite the truth, for what had roused Richard's wrath was not so much Hylda's reluctance to see her new relations as her reluctance to do his will. Hylda's answer, however, was as evasive as his own.

"I do want to see them," she said, "but it is rather formidable to be criticised by strangers."

"I can quite understand that," said Richard, graciously, "but you need not be afraid, little one! I can promise you that they will be very lenient."

The mutual explanations were accepted, and yet each felt dissatisfied. Richard wished that he had taken the opportunity of telling his wife that she must make his will her law, and Hylda wished that she could in some way let him know that she was not so much in awe of his relations as he supposed. But having sought refuge in subterfuge they could not draw back from it now, and the subject was left without further discussion.

Hylda spent some time in making up her mind which dresses she should wear during her visit; she had little doubt of impressing her husband's people with a sense of her grace and dignity, and she had already imagined one or two pretty scenes in which the old people listened with tears in their eyes to her assurances that she had made no condescension in marrying their son. Now that her fate was sealed and the day of the visit fixed, she began to feel some pleasure in the anticipation; she did not express it to herself in so many words, but her idea was that she should

descend upon these good honest creatures like an angel vision, and that they would lie at her feet in an ecstasy of worship. The prospect encouraged her, and she made her preparations in fairly good spirits.

"How many of them will be at home?" she asked, when they had started on their journey, and were speeding over the Great Eastern line on a glowing May afternoon.

"They are all at home," said Richard. He had quite recovered his good humour, and was, moreover, full of delight at the idea of seeing his family again. "Jo is in the business now, you know; Ellen has come back from her quarantine, and Flo is at home, too, now."

"Which shall I like the best?"

"Well, Flo is the beauty; she is the handsomest of us all, though Jo is a good-looking fellow; they are twins, you know, and a good deal alike. But I think you will like Ellen best, though she is not much to look at; she is more like me."

If Richard had expected a disclaimer to this last remark he was doomed to disappointment, for Hylda's thoughts were occupied with the unknown family.

"Ellen is the one who works for the poor, is she not?" she said.

It struck her suddenly that she had been very remiss in gathering information, and that she was but ill-prepared for the coming introductions.

"Yes, she goes in for schools and clubs and self-help institutions, and all those kind of things. I chaff her about it, but she's a good girl all the same."

He unfolded his paper as he spoke, and Hylda subsided into her corner, and began to picture the meeting in her mind; she was not much concerned with her father and mother-in-law, they would be stout and prosy, and not of much account either way; but Richard's sisters might have a good deal to do with her future. Ellen would be plain and insignificant, at first she would despise her brilliant sister-in-law, but soon she would discover with reverent admiration that she had as kind a heart and as executive a brain as her own. Flo would be an empty-headed creature with a certain kind of vulgar good looks; she

would adore her sister-in-law's grace and style from a distance, and secretly try to mould herself on the same pattern.

Hylda blushed a little as she realised the vanity of her thoughts, but it was too late to try and alter them; they were approaching Yarmouth, in another few minutes they would be at the station, and Richard was already folding up his paper and collecting the umbrellas.

"There they are!" he said, as the train drew up; and Hylda looked out anxiously for her first sight of her new relations.

"Well, Jo!" cried her husband; "how did you get away from business at this hour? This is Hylda," he added, without waiting for an answer.

"I told the governor I must come," said Jo, holding out his hand to his sister-in-law. "We don't have a bride to meet every day!"

"No need to ask how you are, Flo," went on Richard. "You look as blooming as ever!"

Blooming was the right word by which to describe her. She was a handsome girl, with glittering eyes and tall, well-developed figure. She kissed Hylda with effusion, and taking no notice of her silence, rattled on to her brother, pouring out remarks, questions, and information all in a breath.

"We've had such splendid fun lately, Carrie Dawson and I," she said, as the fly turned the corner of the street; "we've taken to riding bicycles. We practised outside the town till we could do it all right, and yesterday we rode full steam down the High Street. I wish you'd been there to see; it was simply grand!"

"What did the governor say to that?" asked Richard.

"Oh, he was rather mad, of course, but I didn't mind that."

Hylda listened with a look of calm disapprobation, but her attention was diverted by the discovery that the fly was stopping at one of the shops. She had always taken it for granted that they lived in a private house out of the town, and it was rather a shock to her. She looked at Richard expecting that he would show some anxiety, and

meaning to reassure him with a smile; but, on the contrary, he seemed as unconcerned as possible, chaffing his brother, exchanging jokes with his sister, and evidently eager for the welcome that awaited him. It almost seemed as though he had forgotten her for the moment, for as soon as he had paid the driver he dashed upstairs, leaving her in the narrow hall below. Her heart swelled, and she hardly knew how to reply to Flo's off-hand remarks and Jo's pressing attentions.

But in another minute she heard his returning feet, and looking up saw him coming downstairs with his arm round his mother's capacious waist. The passage was one of some difficulty, for the staircase was far from broad; but Richard did not seem inclined to release her, and still held her while he drew Hylda towards them.

"Here she is," he said.

"And more than glad I am to see her," said Mrs. Weston, while she threw her arms round her new daughter's neck and hugged her cordially.

Hylda tried to respond with good grace, but it was very hot and she was very tired. Altogether, she could not truthfully have said that she enjoyed the manner of her reception.

Richard did not seem to notice anything amiss, however.

"Where's Ellen?" he asked.

"She'll be here in a minute; but come upstairs now, for tea's just ready, and we mustn't keep it waiting."

Hylda would fain have lingered in her room awhile before again encountering the bustle below, but her husband hurried her on remorselessly.

"Friday and Saturday nights are the busiest of all," he said, "and my father must not be kept waiting or he will lose his tea altogether. Make haste, Hylda."

The request was quite reasonable, and yet Hylda felt a good deal annoyed; on such an occasion as the present it seemed to her as if everything ought to have been put aside; she had no idea of the claims of business, and she thought it nothing less than deliberate rudeness that the shop should be considered before herself. She finished her

preparations in silence, and went down to the parlour with a cloud upon her face that she had much ado to turn into a smile. Mr. Weston was tall and broad like his son, and his features were cast in the same mould, but his resolute manner was softened by no University polish.

"Five minutes longer and you would have had no welcome from me," he remarked, as they came in. "What made you choose a Friday to come home?"

Hylda felt repulsed by this greeting, but Richard was in no wise disconcerted, he knew his father's ways, and saw that his words covered much secret satisfaction at the sight of the fair young creature before him.

"Come and sit down at once," said Mr. Weston, having bestowed a kiss on his daughter-in-law's shrinking brow, "I've only got twenty minutes."

"And how much has Jo got?" asked Richard, sarcastically.

"Jo has got fifteen minutes exactly," replied his father.

"Of which I am going to take forty at least," returned Jo, as he stretched himself lazily in his chair, and looked at the well-covered table with a hungry eye.

Hylda's spirit fainted within her. The parlour was over the shop, and looked out into the street, so that it was impossible to open the front windows on account of the noise, while the side window received the full blaze of the western sun, and let in as much heat as air. A boiled leg of mutton and a pair of roast ducks steamed on the table, while piled-up dishes of new potatoes and peas, apple sauce and caper sauce, bread, toast, butter, preserves, and cakes, filled up every available space.

"This is tea and dinner too," said Mrs. Weston, as she threw her cap-strings over her shoulders, and began vigorously pouring out the tea. "You won't find us so much behind London ways, after all, my dear! Jo, assist her to duck; or would you like mutton better? Father will cut you a slice in a minute."

"Thank you, I won't take any meat," said Hylda, "a little toast and butter, please."

"Oh, nonsense, we know how to treat you better than that! Dick, tell her that she is to have some meat."

"You had much better take some, Hylda," said Richard. There was a little frown on his face that Hylda had learnt to respect, and she submitted without further objection.

There was not much time for conversation during the meal, for Mr. Weston ate with lightning speed, and Jo, notwithstanding his declaration to the contrary, did his best to follow his example. Knives and forks clattered, plates and cups passed and repassed, and after the first attentions were over, Hylda had leisure to make her observations.

On one point she acknowledged at once that she must own herself wrong; whatever her new relations might be they were not insignificant. Far from finding herself on a pinnacle, she felt rather overpowered by them. Mrs. Weston was certainly common, but she had an air of pleasant good humour that could not be despised, and Ellen, though plain and retiring, was evidently possessed of much quiet shrewdness. Mr. Weston and the twins were not only striking in appearance, but had as strong an idea as Richard had of making themselves prominent; and, as Hylda looked round the circle, she felt that she had forces to deal with which she had never anticipated.

She was glad when Mr. Weston and Jo went off to the shop, and Mrs. Weston proposed an adjournment to the other room. Now that they were fewer in number things seemed less confusing, and the cooler atmosphere was very agreeable.

"Suppose you go out for a walk with the girls," said Richard, "and I'll have a chat with my mother meanwhile."

"But you would like some sea air, too!" said Hylda, looking at him imploringly.

She could not openly object to his sisters' companionship, but she dreaded the thought of being left to their tender mercies.

"I shall have a run with Jo after the shop closes," said Richard; "in the meantime, the old lady and I have lots to say to one another, haven't we?"

He looked at his mother with a smile of affection, and she, taking his hand, gave it a sounding kiss.

Hylda knew that she ought to be touched by their mutual pleasure at meeting, but she could not reconcile herself to the way in which it was expressed, and she went to get ready with a look which justified Flo's remark to her sister: "I hope she's not going to be in this tearing temper all the time she's here!"

The walk was hardly a comfortable one, for Flo chose to be sulky from a wish to show Hylda that she was not to be put upon, and Ellen was too reserved to be drawn into anything like conversation. Hylda longed heartily to have it over, but as they paced along by the sea, Flo gave a sudden exclamation of delight.

"There's Charlie Fisher!" she cried. "You just see how he'll look at me when I speak to him."

The youth who approached them was one of a type that Hylda had never seen without a shudder; a youth with a flashy tie, black tail-coat, and a round hat, a smart ring on each little finger, and a cheap cigar in his mouth. It gave her a shock to find herself being introduced to this specimen, and to know that it was her husband's friend. He presently lagged behind with him and assailed her with talk interrupted with bursts of laughter. She found her companion expecting to see an expression of annoyance on her face, but to her surprise Ellen was moved by the encounter.

"Was it you or your sister who had scarlet fever?" she asked, by way of something to say.

"I had it. I caught it at one of the schools I visit."

"That is one of the dangers of doing anything of that kind," said Hylda.

"Yes, but the danger of the work is hardly to be weighed against its profit."

"Oh no, of course not. It is quite necessary to come into personal contact with the lower classes if they are ever to be moulded to better things."

"No doubt," said Ellen, with rather a dry inflection in her tone, "but that is not its chief profit."

"What do you mean?" asked Hylda, her thoughts carried back to Mr. Chesterford and his criticisms.

"I mean that the crying need of the present day is not

so much the moulding of the masses as the moulding of the classes."

"I suppose you are a Socialist, then?"

"That word is often used by people who have not the least conception of its meaning," said Ellen quietly.

This was incontestible; but Hylda had not come down to Yarmouth to be exposed to undesirable introductions by one sister-in-law, and to be snubbed by the other. She made no attempt to pursue the conversation therefore, and was greatly relieved when Ellen proposed going indoors.

The next day passed in much the same manner; heavy meals, loud conversation, and continual clatter in the street outside. Hylda's brain began to go round, and she felt that she could not stand it much longer. If her dreams had come true, and they had all fallen victims to her charms, things would have been very different; but as they seemed to consider that she had attained the height of human ambition in being married to Richard, it was not so easy to adjust her feeling with regard to them. They made her one of the family, no doubt, but they did it by treating her with a free-and-easy carelessness that was very disconcerting to one who had been all her life a person of importance. At Stowbury she had been a centre of regard: relations, friends, neighbours, tenants and servants, all looking upon her with interest; she had been so used to it that she had hardly given it a thought, and when Richard singled her out as the object of his affections, it had merely seemed to her like entering upon the possession of another kingdom. But now to find that those who ought to have been the first in subjection were, not rebellious to her sway, but what was even worse, unconscious of it, made her feel as if she were transported into a world where all her former calculations were of no avail.

There was only one exception to the general mode of treating her, and that one she would gladly have dispensed with. Jo seemed to feel it his duty to pay her continual compliments, and to follow her about with admiring looks, that she considered ill-bred in the extreme. It was not possible to ask her husband to remonstrate with him, and all she could do was to adopt a dignified coldness, which



only made him more assiduous in his attentions. She wondered that Richard was not annoyed with him; but then Richard did not seem to be annoyed by his mother's lapses of grammar, nor by Flo's loud-toned remarks, devoid of taste as they frequently were. It was very nice that his intercourse with cultured people had not destroyed his pleasure in being with his own family; but she had always pictured him to herself as the arbiter of the little circle, drawing them up to his level, regulating their conduct, and receiving their grateful admiration in return.

It was in its way as great a shock as her own dethronement had been, to see him accepting his father's dictates, humouring his mother's weaknesses, and enjoying the nonsense of the twins. Even Ellen, who ought to have looked up to him as an oracle of wisdom, did not scruple to disagree with him, when she thought him wrong; and though he treated her to a good deal of teasing, it was evident that he attached much weight to her opinion. How was it that he did not see their deficiencies? Was it only the blindness of affection, or was it something else, of which she could not trust herself to think?

She was glad that the next day was Sunday; perhaps, under its civilising influence, there would be less to jar her, and if only she could secure a little solitude with Richard, she should soon forget her discomfort.

But this latter wish was doomed to disappointment, for when she came downstairs, rather late for the nine o'clock breakfast, she found that it had already been arranged that Richard and Jo should walk out to see an uncle of theirs in a distant village, not returning until tea-time. She thought that Richard ought to have refused to go; or, if that was impossible, he might at least have proposed to take her with him. But no idea of such a thing seemed to enter his head; he agreed as willingly as if he was delighted to be away from her the whole day, and she had hard work to keep the tears from coming into her eyes.

It was a glaring, dusty day, with a touch of east wind, and by the time they had been to church, Hylda was worn out, and would gladly have gone to lie down; but Flo seemed resolved to give her no peace unless she promised

to go out with her; and, weary of her importunity, she consented to go at four o'clock.

Flo's toilette was a sight to behold, when, punctually to the moment, she knocked at Hylda's door. It was too smart, certainly; but there was no doubt that it set off her fine figure to advantage, and Hylda felt an inward conviction that it had been donned for the sake of Charlie Fisher. She was not surprised, therefore, when, as soon as they reached the parade, he appeared in sight, and was greeted by Flo with much animated reproach.

"What business have you to be loafing about here?" she began. "You might have known I wanted a quiet walk without you spying after me!"

Mr. Fisher replied in the same elegant strain, looking at Hylda for admiration meanwhile. But, in spite of all her resolutions of amiability, she could not make a pretence of being interested in their conversation; it simply sickened her, and she looked about vainly for some means of escape.

"Why, there is your brother!" she exclaimed at last, in a tone of relief.

Flo merely glanced at Jo's advancing figure, and then went on with her chatter; but Hylda greeted him with a smile; not only would he set her free from her distasteful companions, but probably Richard was just behind him. She rather repented of her graciousness, however, when she saw that he evidently interpreted it as a proof that she had succumbed to his fascinations. He answered her questions briefly, telling her that Richard was tired, and had gone indoors, and bent his energies to the task of persuading her to walk up and down the parade with him, instead of going in.

"Dick doesn't want you," he said, by way of inducement, "he's talking politics with the governor; besides, he has no business to shut you up even if he wanted to, you are much too good to be wasted like that. Come and walk along the front with me, and I'll show them what a pretty girl is like."

"Thank you, I prefer going in," said Hylda, coldly, but the coldness was quite lost upon Jo; he insisted on giving

her his arm, and escorted her along in full view of the Sunday promenaders, while Flo and Charlie Fisher brought up the rear in their usual state of noisy merriment.

Apparently, however, they fell out before they reached the house, for though he acceded to Jo's request that he would come in and see Dick, he did so with a sulky dignity that formed a strong contrast to his usual volubility.

Richard proved to be engaged in a discussion with his father and Mr. Mason, the tailor from next door, and young Fisher retired into a corner and sat sucking the knob of his walking-stick and glowering at Flo; but this diversion seeming to pall upon him after a time, he suddenly emerged from his corner and began, to Hylda's immense discomfiture, to try to eclipse Jo in her good graces.

"This fellow thinks no one can get a look in when he's there!" he remarked, "but you should see us together and you'd soon know which of us two gets the best innings with the girls. I haven't got such a fine curly moustache, but still I've got a style about me that Jo can't touch."

"That's all very well," broke in Jo, indignantly, "it's easy work to say those sort of things, but how will you prove them?"

"Prove them? Easy enough. Don't you remember that time down at Brighton? Jo and I often spend our holidays together," he added, turning to Hylda, "we go down to Brighton or some place like that, and have a regular good old lark."

"I should have thought you would have been glad of a change from the seaside," said Hylda, controlling her feelings with some difficulty.

"Oh no, we don't care for scenery. We like a band and plenty of entertainments and some slap-up girls to walk about with. You should just see us with all our war-paint on going out on the prom!"

"On the what?" asked Hylda.

Charlie Fisher burst into a noisy fit of laughter. "Ha! ha! That's good and no mistake. I say Flo, Mrs. Richard doesn't know what the prom is!"

Flo was beginning to feel tired of being left in the shade

by this time, and was quite ready to welcome any sign of returning allegiance on the part of her admirer. She plunged into the conversation, therefore, with her powers of rattle and repartee intensified by their brief rest, and Hylda was soon able to escape from the room and seek a few minutes of grateful solitude. She was glad when Ellen asked her to accompany her to the evening service; but though it was a relief to be out of the strife of tongues she did not get on with her sister-in-law; there was a shrewd incisiveness about her speech that pierced through Hylda's fancies and opinions as if they had been flimsy rags, and Ellen's respect seemed as far out of her reach as Flo's admiration. She came home more irritated than she had set out, and when her mother-in-law drew her into a quiet corner after supper and began to read her a sermon on Richard's likes and dislikes, wants and wishes, with all a wife's duties respecting the same, she passed a hasty resolution that never again, no never again, would she set foot within the precincts of that shop in Yarmouth.



## CHAPTER XL

It was the middle of May, and the rooms of Burlington House were thronged with sightseers. The beauties and defects of the Royal Academy pictures were alike hidden by the crowd, and a young man who was drifting aimlessly along with the current, muttered audibly to himself that he had had enough of this to last for the rest of his natural life.

He had scarcely uttered the words, however, when a look of interest suddenly dawned in his eyes, and he began to edge his way towards a figure in a distant corner. It was a work of time, but he was aided in his endeavour by the fact that the lady upon whom he had fixed his attention did not move with the shifting groups around her, but remained perfectly still before the picture that had taken her fancy.

"Which is it that you like so much?" he asked quietly, as he reached her side at last; "that glaring affair, 'Poppies,' or that sentimental being under a tree?"

She turned with a start as he spoke.

"Mr. Chesterford!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea that you were here."

"That is not surprising in such a crowd," said Jock. "I only saw you by the merest chance. I am stopping in town for a few days and thought that I ought to 'do' the Academy, and I was just wishing myself well out of it when I caught sight of you."

He had apparently forgotten his question about the picture, and Hylda turned away without answering it.

The subject was commonplace enough, and the treat-

ment was as commonplace as the subject—sunset lights over submerged meadows, a half-drowned cottage and dripping trees. In spite of its title, "The Spirit of the Flood," it was a very material production, but it reminded her of the Stowbury inundation, and she had fallen into a reverie as she gazed at it. It seemed hardly possible that it was not yet a year since she had sat alone in her study and heard the water creeping up against the walls. She remembered every detail of that night, but she felt as though a hundred years had passed since then. The crowding events of the past eight months had filled her life with such a whirl of emotions that she had had no time to stop, as it were, to recover breath.

A week had gone by since their return from Yarmouth, and Hylda had never entered upon any discussion of the visit with her husband. If he had appealed to her kindly feeling on behalf of his people she would have responded at once, but since he seemed to be entirely without anxiety as to the nature of her impressions, she would not trust herself to speak on the subject at all. She knew that she ought to admire him for his loyalty, but she wanted first to be assured that his loyalty was maintained with an effort and was not merely an unshaken acquiescence in surroundings that he ought to have outgrown.

This was, however, but a shadowy grief, too ill-defined as yet to have any marked effect upon her happiness, and she was able to turn a beaming face upon Jock Chesterford when he asked after her welfare.

"We have such a sweet little house," she said. "You must come and see us some day."

"I shall be delighted," said Jock; "but what an awful crowd this is; can't we find a quiet seat somewhere and have a chat?"

Hylda was nothing loth, and he piloted her through the rooms until they found a breathing space at the top of the stairs leading down to the refreshment room.

"Here is a seat," he said. "What a comfort it is to get a little fresh air. But perhaps you would rather have finished the pictures first?"

"Oh, no," said Hylda; "I am glad of a little rest."

A year ago she had thought of Jock only as a bore, and had despised his empty chatter, but there was something in the sight of a home face that seemed very reviving; and, as he talked on in his usual easy style, she could not help mentally comparing him with Jo Weston; she saw now that when she had called Jock "common" she had only spoken in ignorance.

"When did you see my mother last?" she asked.

"I saw her when I was down at Easter; she was just going off for a long visit to Bath; but of course you have seen her since then."

"We have not been to the Manor yet," said Hylda, evasively. She was most anxious that no one should suspect that there was any breach between her husband and her own people, but Roy changed the subject without asking her any awkward questions.

"I suppose you have heard that Sir Tristram Carlyle is going into Parliament?" he said.

"No, I have heard nothing about it," said Hylda.

The name startled her, but at least it showed that Jock had no suspicion of the truth.

"Yes, he is standing for a bye-election that is just coming on. He is pretty sure to get in, for the Conservatives are strong in that quarter, and he has a lot of interest."

Hylda felt a little jealous pang; she had so often tried to stir her cousin up to enter Parliament, and he had always refused her. Why had he done it on his own account just as she had passed out of his life? She was almost indignant that he could turn his thoughts so readily to public affairs, it showed that his love could not have been very deep seated; she knew that she ought to be glad that he was bearing the blow so well, but she found herself hardly capable of such magnanimity.

"My brother will be very sorry to lose him for so much of the year," went on Jock, "and yet he is glad in a way, for he has often said that Sir Tristram was a first-rate member lost. But I thought all this would have been stale news to you."

"My mother has been away from Stowbury lately, you

see," said Hylda, rising rather hurriedly from her seat. "Shall we walk about a little? It seems to be cooler now."

Jock complied readily enough, and they strolled back through the rooms, while he amused her with his comments on pictures and people. His remarks might not be very wise nor witty, but at least they never overstepped the bounds of good taste, and a quick blush dyed her cheek once or twice as she fancied herself visiting the Academy with Jo Weston or Charlie Fisher.

"I think I must be going now," she said at last; "I have to meet my husband at the Civil Service Stores at half-past one."

"I will just see you into a cab, then," said Jock, as they went down the steps.

Hylda bestowed a bright smile upon him in answer to his bow, and drove off feeling more pleasure than she could have thought possible from a meeting with Jock Chesterford.

"I wonder why he seems so different from what he did," she thought; but this train of reflection was a dangerous one, and she checked it immediately. After all, she loved Richard, and what did anything else matter?

"I met Jock Chesterford at the Academy," she said, when they were seated at lunch.

"Well, and what had that scatterbrain to say for himself?" asked Richard.

Hylda had rather dreaded that he might be displeased when he heard of the encounter, and was relieved to find that he took it so good-humouredly.

"He says that my mother was very well when he saw her, and that Tristram is going to stand for Parliament."

"Oh, he told you that, did he? Then there is no harm in my telling you something more. There is a good deal at stake for me in that election."

"How do you mean?" asked Hylda in surprise.

"Well, it's a curious coincidence, but Rhodes, the man whose work I'm taking, is to oppose your cousin. No one expected that old Colonel Mellings would die just now, or Rhodes would not have gone abroad. However, he has been telegraphed for, and will be back directly."



"And then you will give up the work again?" said Hylda.

"No, no, how dense you are!" said Richard, rather impatiently.

"Of course he can't be at the office while he's electioneering. But the real point is this, if he gets in he is going to resign his post altogether, and I shall stand a very fair chance of stepping into it."

"And will that be a good thing for you?"

"I should just think it will! Three hundred a year and plenty of *kudos* into the bargain; there are heaps of men who would give their ears to have such a chance. You see now how wise I was to take the temporary work."

"Yes," said Hylda; then added, after a moment's hesitation, "but of course, if Tristram gets in, Mr. Rhodes will not resign."

"But he will not get in!" said Richard sharply. "Rhodes is a first-rate man, up to all the latest ideas; it is an agricultural constituency, and the labourers will plump for him, you'll see! They know well enough that the Radicals are the only people who will ever lift a finger for them!"

"Who will ever *promise* to lift a finger for them, you mean!" said Hylda.

She had almost forgotten to whom she was speaking, and she started as she heard the tone in which her husband replied.

"Once for all, Hylda," he said, "I will not have those worn-out sneers repeated by you. Of course I know well enough where you have picked them up, but Carlyle will find out now, if he has never done so before, that Conservatism is a played-out game."

"I was not quoting my cousin," said Hylda proudly.

"Well, we won't argue about that; whether you were quoting or not, the fact remains the same. You must take your opinions from me, now; you have been delivered from the dead-alive set among whom I found you, and you must relinquish their musty ideas for good and all."

Hylda was silent; she could hardly tell which startled her most, Richard's reception of her denial of his charge

that she was repeating her cousin's views, or his fiat that she was to become a colourless copy of himself. Still, it was true that he had given her the deliverance for which she craved, and perhaps it was true also that she owed him a special obedience in return; it was evident, at any rate, that he believed she did, and Hylda had begun to find out that her husband's beliefs were fetters, from which she had no power of escaping.

Richard was not displeased at receiving no answer; he disliked people who argued with him, and it never struck him that her silence could be otherwise than acquiescent. He talked to her quite good-temperedly as they finished their lunch, and saw her off on her return journey before he went back to his office.

"I shall be home at half-past six this evening," he said, as she drove off; and, as he strolled along the pavement, he thought to himself how nice it was to feel that he should find his dinner ready, and a pretty little wife to sit opposite to him and listen to his remarks. He liked the things that success brings in its train fully as well as success itself; and he felt that he had gone several steps up the ladder when he became master of Beryl Villa and the appurtenances thereof, among which appurtenances his wife ranked first and foremost.

If anyone had warned Hylda that after her marriage she must expect to be considered as an appurtenance, she would have given them the lie direct. It was, in fact, her intense longing to strike out an independent line for herself that had made her fall such an easy prey, for life with Richard seemed filled with the very opportunities that she desired. It was true that of late she had somewhat forgotten this longing; her heart had for the moment got the better of her intellect, and emotions seemed far more satisfying than ambitions. And yet, though she allowed herself to be carried away on the stream of feeling, she was conscious all the while that her intellectual faculties were not dead, and that when she became a little more accustomed to her new life, they would re-assert themselves, and demand attention. How soon this would happen she could not tell. Perhaps not for some few years, perhaps not until she was

old and grey-headed. She was quite indifferent to the time of their return, so long as her heart was absorbed with the passionate joy that Richard's love had awakened within her.

But now, although they had been married but a fraction of a year, Hylda felt, to her surprise, that her interest in her old pursuits was already coming back to her. She would not acknowledge the fact at first; but, little by little, it became too strong to be ignored, and she told herself that it proved beyond a doubt that her literary gift was a genuine one. This conviction, however, did not bring with it the glow of delight that it would have done a year ago. It was love, and not intellect, that she now wished to be lord of all. She tried to persuade herself that it was nothing more than her interest in her husband's work that made her thoughts turn longingly to books and pen; but she tried without success, for his work was a subject of which he seldom spoke to her, and, when she questioned him about it, he silenced her with a caress or a word of affection.

But on this afternoon, when Richard had plainly told her that she was to possess no opinions but such as he chose to give her, she felt that her view of the situation was becoming more clear. She went up to her own room as soon as she reached home, and determined not to leave it until she had thoroughly thought the matter out. Richard was not in any way to blame—that proposition must be plainly stated at once; if he were to blame, the whole structure of her life would be undermined, and, at any cost, that must be prevented. But someone must be to blame; and, if it was not Richard, then it must be herself.

She looked back over the months that had passed since their meeting, and acknowledged for the first time that she had given him no reason to think much of her strength of mind; whatever he had said she had agreed to; whatever he had objected to she had at once abjured. Her opinion of his wisdom had not altered, but she felt that it would be happier for them both if she could show him that she possessed some powers on her own account. The best

way to do this would be to take up her writing again, and prove to him that she could apply herself to abstruse studies as well as he. In the early days of their acquaintance he had talked with her on equal terms, as one fully able to enter into his ideas, and there was no reason why he should not do so again ; but in the meantime she must remember that his having ceased so to talk to her was only a proof of his affection ; there were plenty of people with whom he could discuss literature, but there was only one to whom he could make love !

Hylda had by this time argued herself into a most complacent frame of mind ; she rose from her chair with renewed cheerfulness, and began to dress for dinner with the resolve that she would say nothing of all this to Richard until her plans were fully matured, and as meanwhile she was prepared to forget all that had annoyed her, the evening passed in unbroken harmony.

As soon as Richard had gone to the office next day, she set to work to unpack the box of books and papers that had remained untouched since their marriage. The sight revived a train of old associations ; note-books without number ; essays, complete and incomplete, books of reference and annotated editions, brought back memories of past effort and aspiration, and she longed to handle the familiar weapons again. But here a difficulty confronted her—the rooms in the Manor were so numerous that her only trouble had been to select a study, but where, in the narrow confines of Beryl Villa, could she find a place to call her own ? She could not write in the drawing-room or dining-room, for she must feel herself secure from interruption ; but her bedroom was so small that there was no space for a writing-table. She began to feel despairing, but suddenly a bright thought darted into her mind : why should she not arrange a place for herself in Richard's study—he was out so much in the day that he could have no possible objection, and, even if he should be at home, had he not often told her that her presence was a constant inspiration to him ?

When Hylda was once possessed by any idea, she knew no rest until it was carried out, so, piling up her books

and papers, she carried them down to the study and looked round to see where she should make her encampment. The room, though small, was extremely neat; Richard was very exact in all his arrangements, and liked to have everything ready to his hand; the books and pamphlets that he was using at the moment lay in orderly packets on the writing-desk, and papers and journals were all placed together on the table by the window.

This table was just what Hylda wanted, and, as her husband never wrote at it, she had no scruple in adopting it. The papers would do just as well along the ledge of the bookcase, and she set to work at once to remove them. Her own possessions more than filled the table, and she stacked the rest underneath. It was quite late by the time she had finished, and she was too tired to begin writing; but she looked forward joyfully to the morrow, as she thought of the pleasure of once more taking up her pen.

Richard was rather late home that evening, and all through the first part of dinner he seemed to be lost in thought, and made but brief answers to Hylda's remarks.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, when the maid had left the room for a moment.

"Oh, no! Nothing that you would understand, that is to say. I have been rather bothered at the office."

He relapsed into a silence that Hylda did not feel inclined to break; but as soon as the door was finally closed he looked up with a little frown.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "did you make all that mess in my study?"

"I have not made any mess," said Hylda, her resentment rising.

"Well, muddle, then, if you like the word better. I was looking for a pamphlet just now, and I never saw such a state as things were in—books littering the floor, and papers all over the place. Just see that it is put straight again to-morrow, please."

Hylda was dismayed; but she would not relinquish her plan without a struggle.

"But I have been busy all day arranging it!" she said.

"There is no other place in the house where I can write comfortably."

"Did you mean to share my study with me?" said Richard, with a look of amusement, in which some contempt was mingled.

"You always said we should share everything," said Hylda, striving to hide the quiver in her voice.

"No doubt I did; but, like other remarks of the kind, it was only a figure of speech. You must see that it would be impossible."

"I suppose you will say next that love is only a figure of speech," said Hylda.

She was frightened as soon as the words had slipped out. Suppose Richard should assent, what would life have left for her? But he took the remark very composedly.

"My dear child, don't talk such nonsense!" he said. "I can quite allow for your being a little vexed, after you have had the trouble of carting your things downstairs, but I daresay you will have forgiven me by the time you have carted them up again."

He held out his hand to her with a smile; but Hylda could not swallow her feelings all at once.

"I suppose you think that it does not matter whether I have a place to write in or not?" she said.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't think it does matter very much," said Richard, "you won't find that you have time for it now that you are married. What with the housekeeping and your social duties you will not have much leisure, and I am anxious that you should keep up your practising, for music is always useful."

The epithet struck Hylda as strangely inappropriate, but she could not stay to argue such a minor point.

"You seem quite to forget all that you said to me about my work when I first knew you," she said; "you told me that I must read and write incessantly, and that you would always criticise my things and help me to improve."

Richard looked annoyed. There are few possessions more inconvenient on the part of one's friends than a good memory, and many a man has wished that he could inflict amnesia upon those who have listened to him in the past.

"I have no doubt I told you all that, and a good deal more into the bargain," he said, "and it was all true so far as it went. But we are on a different footing now, and I can say things to you that I could not say then. Your literary gift is not worth a snap of the fingers, and it is much better for me to tell you so at once. I shall not prevent your writing if you like to do so, but it can never be more than a secondary thing in your life. Any clever schoolboy, or schoolgirl either, could turn out essays as good as yours by the dozen; the world doesn't want them, and no editor will take them. If you are wise, therefore, you will give up scribbling, but I shall not make a point of it as long as you do not let it interfere with me. My work is really important, and your duty is to order your life so as to help me most. A good wife merges herself in her husband, and the sooner you merge yourself in me the happier it will be for both of us. Now, shall we go into the drawing room?"

He patted his wife's shoulder caressingly as he passed her to open the door, but he neither expected nor wished for an answer. He had spoken, and that was enough.

He sat down in his usual chair and turned up the reading lamp, but as soon as he had opened his evening paper Hylda rushed upstairs to her own room and locked the door. At first she could do nothing but draw deep breaths as though she had escaped from some horrible suffocation; but soon sense and thought began to return, and angry tears forced themselves into her eyes, burning her as they fell.

"Your literary gift is not worth a snap of the fingers." "If you are wise you will give up scribbling." "The sooner you merge yourself in me the happier it will be for both of us." The words seemed to stab and sting her like living scorpions, and she writhed in mingled rage and pain. Was this to be the end of all her hopes? Were love and ambition to be buried in one common grave? Was she to sink to the level of the poor domestic drudges who had no thought beyond their household cares?

These questions, and many others as wild as these, Hylda poured out as she paced her room. It seemed

impossible that Richard could love her if he could treat her so ; and if he did not love her, what use was there in living ? But this thought was too terrible, and she tried to turn her mind back to the cause of her resentment. Richard should see that she had some pride ; she would never mention her writing to him again ; she would toil early and late, doing everything for his comfort that he could reasonably require, and in secret she would study with all her might, carry out her old idea of publishing her work anonymously, and wring a confession of her genius from her husband's reluctant lips.

Nothing so much calms and soothes wounded feelings as to let the mind run freely over scenes of future triumph, and by the time Hylda had reached this point she was ready to bathe her burning eyes and descend to the drawing-room. She had even some furtive thoughts of forgiving her husband, but Richard evidently stood in no need of forgiveness ; he was stretched out comfortably in his chair with his eyes half shut and appeared to have entirely forgotten the preceding trouble.

The sight of his indifference roused her anger once more, but before it had time to find expression there was a ring at the door-bell.

" Bother ! " muttered Richard, edging himself up into a more conventional attitude, and his frown deepened as the maid announced : " Mr. Chesterford."

" How do you do, Mrs. Weston ! " said Jock. " I have soon come to look you up, you see. What a jolly little place this is ; but I had some difficulty in finding it. This is the first time that I have penetrated into St. John's Wood."

The words might have sounded supercilious if they had been uttered with a shade less good-humour, but Jock's gaiety had something very attractive about it, and it was not easy to be offended with him. Unfortunately, however, Richard was prejudiced beforehand, and turning on his heel with scant ceremony, he sat down to his paper again.

Hylda was vexed by his behaviour, but her suppressed agitation showed itself in glowing cheeks and sparkling



eyes, and Jock, who was as yet too inexperienced to understand the signs of feeling, looked at her with some wonder.

"I should be a raving lunatic if I had been shut up all this time with buffer Weston!" he reflected, and fearful of allowing his surprise to appear in his face, he began to talk of the first thing that entered his head.

"Sir Tristram is going to have a contest after all," he said; "the other side haven't a chance, but still, they must make their voices heard."

"Of course there will be a contest," said Richard, raising his eyes from his paper. "No one ever thought otherwise."

"Indeed they did," said Jock. "I know a man down in that part of the world, and he told me that Carlyle would have been unopposed if some carpet bagger of a Radical had not descended upon the constituency at the last moment. But in my opinion it is only a farce got up to make a contest."

Hylda looked up in some alarm; this was just the kind of speech to rouse Richard's wrath, and she knew exactly in what tone he would answer it.

"Your opinion is as shallow as your information," he said, curtly.

Jock's face flushed angrily, and he was on the verge of a retort when Hylda interposed.

"Oh, don't talk politics any more!" she said, "I want to have some music, to remind me of Stowbury days. Come and sing with me, Mr. Chesterford."

Jock was not proof against this appeal, and the rest of the time passed peacefully away until he took his departure.

"What an empty-headed young idiot that is!" said Richard, as the door closed behind him.

"At any rate, he makes himself extremely agreeable," returned Hylda.

Her excitement had not yet subsided, or she would not have dared anything like a stricture on her husband's behaviour; she looked at him with some alarm even as it was, but she need not have feared, nothing was less likely

to enter Richard's thoughts than that his wife should presume to criticise him.

"I remember the time when you thought him a disagreeable bore," he said.

Hylda remembered the time, too, and the recollection had power to soften her; all the sweetness and light of the world had been bound up for her then in Richard's voice and look, and her anger died away as she thought of it.

"Do you love me quite as much as you did then?" she said, with a sudden change of mood.

"Of course I do," said Richard, drawing her to him. "Why do you ask?"

But this Hylda could not tell him; she would not risk re-opening their late discussion, and she laid her cheek silently against his.

"I love you for yourself," he said, seeing that she did not reply, "and if you were the cleverest woman in the world, I should not love you more than I do now. I shall soon get to the top of the tree, now that I have you to make me happy, and you will find then that you have not a wish ungratified."

"I know exactly how to treat her," he thought, as he settled down to his reading again. "Women always need a little touch of the curb now and then; it would have been folly to let her begin that writing nonsense again; she will put it out of her head now."

In this opinion he was the more confirmed when he went into his study next day and found it restored to its former condition.



## CHAPTER XII.

THE town of Bennington was gay with flags and noisy with brass bands; electors had crowded in from all sides to hear the poll declared, and the streets were full of bustle. The Mayor had duly appeared on the top of the ancient market place, supported by the chief personages of the neighbourhood, the Conservatives made themselves hoarse with their shouts, and the Radicals with their groans; Mr. Ralph Rhodes uttered burning invectives of mingled scorn and compassion, and Sir Tristram Carlyle returned thanks for his election in a few simple but effective sentences.

Callous as Hylda had considered her cousin to be to the interests of his country, there had never been a time since he could remember when he had not desired to enter Parliament. He was not greedy of political prizes, nor anxious to win distinction as a party leader, but there was a strong fascination for him in the thought of helping to mould a nation's laws. Like all human beings, however, he found that his desire was not easy of fulfilment; there were many claims upon him, and if he married a wife without wealth of her own, he must be content to go on in his old, quiet mode of life. The sacrifice had not cost him a sigh. Hylda was worth all the world to him, and as for work, that could be found anywhere: as a landlord and a magistrate he had no need to complain of want of scope. But Hylda's marriage had changed the face of affairs, and as soon as she was irrevocably gone from him, he set himself to consider the new aspect of his life and bring himself into relation with it.

Tristram was no melodramatic hero, he neither raved, nor stamped, nor tore his hair; he bought no bottles of poison, nor did he gaze longingly at his revolver; but, nevertheless, he fully recognised the fact that he could not go back to his daily round exactly as though nothing had happened. If Hylda had been taken from him by death he would have borne the blow, crushing though it would have been; he would have had the sympathy of friends to cheer him, and he would have had the memory of her love to bless him to his life's end. But, under the present circumstances, he could not blame his friends for blaming her, and he had no remembrance but the bitter one that her love had been given to another.

It was not possible for him to leave Stowbury altogether: that would be to shirk his duties and disgrace himself in his own eyes, but he might perhaps go round the world and enlarge his mind by travel. The scheme did not altogether recommend itself to him, however; it savoured of ignominious retreat, and what seemed to him a far more effectual cure was to go into Parliament if he could by any means secure a seat.

Some of the obstacles which had stood in his way were already removed, the expenses in connection with his marriage had all been set aside and he might now arrange for the necessary outlay; besides, if he was not to be in London as a married man, a set of bachelor's chambers would be all that he would need, and there would be no question of a second establishment.

He laid the matter before his mother, and received her full approval; she was quite ready to do all in her power to further his views, and as soon as possible he went up to London to consult with his political friends. He had expected to bide his time until another General Election, but the member for Bennington being ill beyond hope of recovery, he was asked to consider himself as his political heir. The contest was looked forward to with the keenest interest; both sides were unceasingly active, and both were equally sure of success; but the Conservatives outnumbered their opponents in the constituency, and they did their duty in coming to the poll; their candidate was

brought in with a satisfactory majority, and the Liberals consoled themselves with a "moral victory."

Tristram had attained the object of his desire, and, like many another before him, he learned that though all things come to him who waits, too often the waiting time has robbed them of their flavour! He had looked forward to a seat in Parliament as the summit of his ambition, and now that he had it he found that it was but putting his neck from one heavy collar into another. He had no thought of giving in, however; the ache at his heart would not be the greater because he did his part in the world's working day, the night would come by-and-by when no more would be required of him, and in the meantime he would struggle on as best he might.

His courage met with one immediate reward: the fact of being thrown with people who knew nothing of his private history helped him to bear his pain, much as the unconscious companionship of a child soothes the sorrows of its elders. The pain was there all the same, but it was not continually roused into fresh activity by words and looks that said, "We know."

Hylda, meanwhile, was thinking much of him. She had a good deal to bear at the time of the election, for Richard's temper was sorely disturbed by his friend's failure. Mr. Ralph Rhodes was one of her special aversions; a small, bilious-looking man, with sharp little eyes, that seemed able to ferret out everybody's weaknesses. Richard admired him, and was jealous of him at the same time. He considered himself his friend's superior in every point of view, and yet there was no doubt that he had been left behind in the race. Mr. Rhodes not only possessed one of the best sub-editorships in London, but he was looked upon as an adept in the art of political leader-writing, and the most glittering prizes of journalism were almost within his reach. This was very galling, for the chief use that Richard made of his friends was to regard them as mile-stones by which to mark his own progress, and the sub-editor at the present moment marked a league of failure, but he felt his hopes revive when he heard that Rhodes was inclined to change his literary life for a political one.

The little, eager-faced, self-assertive pressman was certainly as unlike the ordinary idea of a martyr as he was unlike the ordinary idea of a county member; but yet he was not without some claims to the crown which is bestowed on those who sink their own interest for the good of the cause they espouse. Rhodes was a red-hot Radical; he hated royalty and aristocracy with a righteous hatred, and the more he wrote on political subjects the more he longed to mingle in the fray. But this could not be done without self-sacrifice; to play the part he meant to play in politics he must renounce all that he possessed, and give himself to a life of much toil and little pay. That his convictions were honest could not, therefore, be doubted, and though Richard called him a fool, he was not quite insensible to his heroism.

But Rhodes' first attempt to enter the lists was a failure, and Richard concealed his disgust with some difficulty when he saw him resume his chair at the office. His only hope was that, having been entered as a racer, he would be spoilt for harness, and this hope seemed in a fair way to be fulfilled. Meetings here, committees there, and consultations everywhere, did not help on his journalistic work, and when Richard found how things were going, he flattered himself that he should speedily be recalled.

"I don't understand why you are so anxious to get the post," said Hylda, one day, when he had, for the hundredth time, been talking over his prospects. "You will have to give up your extension work, if you do, and I always thought that you had your whole heart in that."

"Did you?" said Richard, with a smile that was very like a sneer; "that only shows what a good actor I am! I never looked upon it as more than something to fill up my time. It is all very well in its way, but I could not stand it for long."

"But it seems to me such a noble work!" persisted Hylda. "I can't think of anything more splendid than going about spreading knowledge. What can be better than enlightening ignorance?"

"Nothing!" said Richard. "But it is better to enlighten the ignorance of a thinking man than the ignorance of a

stultified old fogey or a silly schoolgirl. As a journalist, I write as a man for a man; as an extension lecturer I spend my time in mincing up information to make it fit for callow beaks."

"All lecturers do not speak so slightly of their work," said Hylda.

"I daresay not; I speak for myself."

He sauntered out of the room as he uttered the last words, and Hylda rose from her chair and walked slowly across to the window, leaning her head wearily against the pane and looking out into the little garden.

It was a golden July evening. Summer was at its height, and London was stifling by night and by day. Hylda felt a sudden longing for Stowbury air, and one evening in particular came back to her mind—a July evening, two years ago, when she and her mother had been dining at the Court, and Tristram took her on the river in his boat. She could hear the splash of the oars now, and the chime of bells from the distant church tower. It had seemed familiar even to flatness then, but now she roused herself impatiently that she might disturb the haunting vision. Why should she think of the past? She had attained the object of her hope in escaping from it. It could not be possible that her satisfaction should fade so quickly!

A mocking little puff of wind swept across the garden as if in answer to her thought, and whirled a few yellow leaves from the tree before the window. Autumn may come in summer-time, it seemed to say, and she shuddered as she watched them fall.

She responded somewhat languidly to Richard's affectionate words that evening. He had not relaxed in his attentions, but whereas they had once roused a flood of rapture in Hylda's heart, she often wished now that in their place he would give her half-an-hour of intelligent conversation. Richard, however, did not notice shades of manner; he seemed quite unconscious of any falling off in her appreciation, and the evening ended without one of the jarring incidents that she had learned to dread.

"I have a piece of news for you," he said next day, as he came in from a visit to the British Museum.

"What is it?" asked Hylda.

"I met Rhodes in the library to-day and he offered us an invitation for the Foreign Office Reception. He has an uncle who is pretty high up there, and he told Rhodes he would get him a card for a gentleman and lady if he liked, so Rhodes offered it to me, which was very decent of him, I think."

"Very," said Hylda, who had learnt to understand this, with other unaccustomed expressions. "When is it to be?"

"On the 13th. It is to be one of the last functions of the season. Well, shall we accept?"

"Certainly," said Hylda, "I should like to go very much."

"It will be a swell affair, you know; you will have to put on all your toggery."

"You forget that I have been in London before," said Hylda.

She felt it necessary to show her husband that she was not quite so provincial as he seemed to suppose, but it was not easy to take Richard at a disadvantage.

"I remember it very well," he said coolly, "and more especially your descriptions of it!"

It was not the first time that he had given her cause to regret her confidences in the past; it had been very sweet to pour out all her grievances and criticisms to him, but somehow they did not sound so well when they came back to her from his lips. She had enjoyed making him laugh over her London experiences, but it was not pleasant to have them brought up against her now. She would not discuss the matter any further, but she made an inward resolve that her appearance should be worthy of the occasion.

"I shall ask Rhodes to dine with us to-morrow," said Richard, on the day before the event.

"Oh! must he go with us?" said Hylda, who was not at all elated at the thought of having such a cavalier in her train.



"Why not?" said Richard. "If it had not been for him we should not have gone ourselves."

Hylda had nothing to reply, and the matter was settled. There was a strong antipathy between her and Mr. Rhodes, who scorned all show and fashion with a bitter scorn; but since she had to endure his presence she might as well try to convert him, and she spent her best energies on her preparations.

The result was certainly well worth looking upon; in her white silk dress, with jewels glittering on her neck and in her hair, Hylda was as fair a vision as the eye of man could desire, and she looked at herself in the glass with some satisfaction before she descended to the drawing-room. She knew at once that she had achieved her aim, so far as her husband was concerned, for his face and voice alike showed his gratification; but Mr. Rhodes greeted her with his usual assumption of indifference, and she made one of the prettily-petulant movements that had been habitual to her of old as she looked across at Richard.

"You would far rather talk to a feminine coal-miner in a sack and a pair of hobnailed boots than to a fashionable lady, eh, Rhodes?" he said, jokingly.

"Certainly," said the other, "the coal-miner would be able to furnish me with useful information."

"You take a very narrow view of life!" said Hylda. Richard, who could enjoy her daring speeches when they were not directed against himself, burst out laughing.

"A very fair shot!" he remarked. "However, I am too much of your way of thinking to admit that my wife has the truth on her side."

The announcement of dinner interrupted them, and the conversation turned to more general topics. Hylda had been afraid that she should hear some unpleasant remarks about her cousin; but the subject of the election was still a sore one with Mr. Rhodes, and he made no allusion to it. Instead of politics, he talked literary gossip, and she listened with open ears, forgetting her dislike of the man in the interest of his conversation. It was the kind of talk that Hylda had always longed to hear: how much one celebrated

novelist had made by his last book; what well-known people had been put into his pages by another; how one new poet had quarrelled with his rival at a club dinner; what cunning devices had been resorted to to secure a fashionable man of letters as contributor to a new magazine. She felt a keener sense of enjoyment than she had done for a long time, as she listened, and was only sorry when the time came to start.

"I suppose you know all about going in, and that kind of thing, Rhodes?" said Richard, as they drove along.

"Indeed, I don't. My respected relative never took any notice of me until he found that I was beginning to be known. He says that those articles on Turkish Finance that you and I put together have attracted some notice among the Foreign Office bigwigs, and that is the reason of the present civility."

"You did not tell me that before," said Richard, gleefully. "My star is in the ascendant!"

Hylda's heart was beating high with pleasure, as they drove down to Westminster. She was on her way to one of the grandest receptions in London; her husband was proud of her, and she had just had a proof of his power. Life seemed to have brightened up wonderfully since yesterday; and no one looking at her radiant beauty would have guessed that any care lay hidden beneath.

"Here we are!" said Rhodes, at last, as, after a journey that seemed interminable, they pulled up in a street blocked with carriages.

Their turn to alight came at last; and, when they had been ushered through courtyards and passages, and had emerged into the great hall at the foot of the staircase, it seemed like entering upon a new world. Lights blazed and jewels sparkled, flowers bloomed on every side, dazzling uniforms and splendid dresses crowded together, and the whole scene was one of fairy beauty. Ralph Rhodes was entirely unembarrassed, and looked about him with the air of a pert cock-sparrow, that had found its way by mistake into a preserve of peacocks; but Richard seemed to have grown suddenly awkward, and hung back as though he would have liked to escape.

"We must keep moving," said Hylda, in an undertone, and, at the rate of an inch a minute, they passed on with the current, until they reached the spot where the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and his wife stood shaking hands incessantly with their guests.

At this moment a sudden thrill went through the crowd, and there was a general pause and a shaking into place that was rather puzzling to the uninitiated. A free passage was cleared, the multitude backing on all sides as though marshalled by invisible whippers-in, the Minister and his wife began to descend the staircase, then the band struck up, and even the dullest knew what was happening.

Another moment and the royalties appeared in sight—a gracious company, smiling and bowing with as much apparent pleasure as though the scene was one of the freshest and most delightful novelty to them. Hylda gazed with frank enthusiasm, but Mr. Rhodes turned ostentatiously upon his heel and looked in the opposite direction.

"We can get on again now, thank goodness!" he said, when the procession had passed. It is really too bad that people should be jammed against walls and into corners just to let princes and princesses have a passage. We are just as good as they."

Richard only looked amused at this speech, but Hylda felt all her traditions outraged.

"Why do you despise them?" she said.

"Because I despise all pomp and show. Think of the money that is squandered upon an affair of this kind and then look at the starving thousands outside!"

Hylda looked at him quietly. "What a good thing it is for you that a Conservative Government is in power," she remarked, "it would be so awkward for you to have to censure your own party!"

Mr. Rhodes generally had a retort on the tip of his tongue, but he was silenced for the moment, and Richard, who was in some awe of his wrath, took the opportunity of changing the subject.

"If we could get in behind that balustrade," he said, "we should have a first-rate view of the people. You

know all the notorieties, Rhodes, and you can point them out to us."

"What do you want to look at notorieties for?" growled Rhodes, who had not recovered his temper by any means; but he was not proof against the flattery of being told that he knew everybody worth knowing, and slowly edging their way through the crowd they reached the coveted spot and took up their position.

"Who is that in scarlet?" asked Hylda, as a tall man in a glaring uniform passed beneath them. •

"That is the Master of the Horse; I must send you the latest caricature of him. Tom Bellars did it, and it is simply splendid."

"Tom has gone up the tree hand over hand," remarked Richard; "he must be making between two and three thousand a year."

"Rather a change for him!" said Rhodes.

"Do you remember when he used to take art seriously and rave about the Mission of the Painter?"

"Oh, who is that beautiful woman?" interrupted Hylda, as she pointed out a queenlike apparition among the crowd.

"That is the Duchess of Bexfield. You call her beautiful, Mrs. Weston, but you ought to have seen her a few years ago; she has gone off fearfully since she took to rouging, and her hair is a palpable wig."

Hylda felt her dislike of Mr. Rhodes returning in full force. He seemed to take the bloom off every subject he touched, and she wished with all her heart that they could get rid of him. Rhodes had no intention of leaving them, however; much as he verbally despised beauty and fashion, he was not insensible to the advantage of appearing with such a lovely and well-dressed companion. If he had been alone, he would have passed unnoticed, for though he knew well enough that a small stature and a plain face are no disqualifications to celebrity, he had not yet reached the fame that would suffice to carry them off; but he had seen the admiring looks of which Hylda was unconscious, and he was not disposed to relinquish his prize.

"Are the royalties going already?" she said, as the

crowd fell back a little; and from one of the inner rooms a figure in star and ribbon appeared, escorted by the host.

"Perhaps he has some other engagement; he seems to be going alone," said Rhodes. "But just look there; what a sycophant!"

He hissed out the last words in quite a different tone, and the knuckles of the hand that grasped the balustrade grew white with pressure. Hylda looked down in surprise, and saw that the young man who was just being presented by the Minister, was none other than her cousin.

"Did you ever see such a disgusting exhibition?" went on Mr. Rhodes, who, to do him justice, was quite unconscious of any connection between Sir Tristram Carlyle and his companion. "You can see, by that sickly smile, that he is a regular toad-eater. Why should he bow in that cringing way, as if he were standing before the embodiment of all the virtues?"

"Should you speak in that way if you were the member for Bennington?" asked Hylda, coldly.

"Yes, I should," he replied; "a man may gain his seat without losing his self-respect. But how did you know that that was the member for Bennington?"

"Sir Tristram Carlyle is my cousin," said Hylda, turning towards her husband. "Shall we move on a little, Richard?" she said. "The Prince has gone now, and the rooms are clearer."

"That is easier said than done," said Richard. "We have managed to get into this corner, but it is another matter to get out. Besides, we can see much better here than if we were down below."

Hylda did not like to say more; but she had suddenly realised that her position was not a very dignified one. Her companions were leaning their arms on the balustrade, and passing remarks as freely as though they were looking over a pier-wall at a bank-holiday mob, while she was compelled to stand between them, a mark for all beholders. She dreaded lest Tristram should catch sight of her; but before she could make any further move, she saw that it was too late. A bystander made a remark, and glanced in

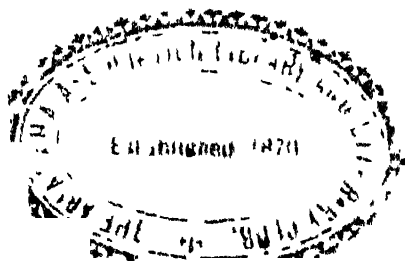
her direction ; Tristram's eyes followed his friend's, and a sudden change came over his face.

"Richard," she said, hastily, "I must go ; the heat is too much for me."

Richard turned and looked at her ; he saw that her face was white and her lips trembling, and an uneasy frown contracted his forehead.

"Come along then," he said, but he did not offer to help her, and it was Mr. Rhodes who gave her his arm and piloted her through the crowd.

They passed close to the place where Tristram was standing, but he merely bowed as they went by without attempting to speak. If she had been alone with her husband he would have forced himself to make the effort, but when he saw her leaning on the arm of Ralph Rhodes he felt that the gulf between them was too wide. He had heard the remarks that had been circulating as to Hylda's appearance and her companion's behaviour, and his whole soul revolted at the sight of the situation in which she was placed. But it was not for him to interfere ; he had no longer the right to shield her, and she must go on her way with the protector whom she had chosen. He gazed after her like one in a dream until the shifting crowd hid her from his sight, then, making his own way out, he turned towards Westminster Bridge, and, standing under the shadow of the clock tower, watched the dark torrent of the river as it hurried restlessly along under the midnight sky.



## CHAPTER XIII.

A GENERAL on the eve of battle, and the leader of the House of Commons on the eve of an important division, are anxious and sorely-tried individuals, but, in his own estimation, their anxieties are as nothing to those of the editor of a review on the eve of going to press. His duel is, in fact, a triangular one, for he has to encounter, not only his publishers and his subscribers, but his contributors, who are often the most difficult to deal with of the three.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell, editor of the *Monthly Review*, looked upon himself as the most sorely tried of all the editors in London as he sat in his office one bright September afternoon. There was blue sky overhead, and the soft sailing clouds made him think of the white wings of the yacht that lay idly in a distant harbour; a fresh breeze swept through the streets, and whirled into the corners of the squares, and, as it rustled his window-blinds, he heard in fancy the sound of feet brushing through the stubble and the whirr of partridges as they rose on the air.

But these regretful thoughts were not the true cause of his disquietude; he was a just man, and having returned a day or two before from a six weeks' holiday, he knew that it was only fair that the sub-editor should have his turn; what did ruffle him was that the said sub-editor should have left things in such confusion.

"Rhodes is a clever fellow, but he is not worth all this to me," he said to himself, as he looked ruefully at the piles of unanswered letters and uncorrected proofs. "I

shall have to work night and day to get straight again, and I don't know where to turn for help at this time of the year."

"Can Mr. Weston speak to you, sir?" said a clerk, opening the door at this moment.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell looked at him without replying. The interruption seemed as if it ought to have been Providential, but apparently he could not quite make up his mind whether to regard it so or not.

"Show him in," he said at length; and in another minute Richard stood before him.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he said, "but I was passing by, and knowing that Rhodes was away, I thought I would drop in and see if I could do anything to help you. I expect you have a good deal on hand."

"There is certainly a good deal to be done," said Mr. Dudley-Hartnell in a tone of measured courtesy that contrasted strongly with Richard's off-hand manner; he glanced at the piles on his table with some little hesitation, then making up his mind suddenly he added, "As you are here, perhaps you will look over some of these proofs for me?"

"With all my heart," said Richard, and taking the bundle from the editor's hand, he went to a table near the window and sat down.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell took up a letter that needed an immediate reply, and spreading a sheet of paper before him, he dipped his pen in the ink. His ideas did not flow freely, however, and for some time he did nothing but draw idly on his blotting-paper, while he looked thoughtfully at the figure in the window.

A difficult question was being debated in the editor's mind, a question that had arisen there before Richard's entrance, but which had since been brought into new prominence. Should he offer him the sub-editorship or not? He knew that Richard would be only too ready to take it, but so would several other men whom he could lay his finger on, and the point to be decided was whether his qualifications were better than theirs. That he possessed many good qualities was certain. He was well-informed,



a quick reader, and a ready writer; energetic, industrious, and pushing.

At the last word he paused. Pushing! Yes, that epithet described Weston's advantages and disadvantages at the same time, and, unfortunately for Weston, push was not one of the qualities that Mr. Dudley-Hartnell admired. He was a man who had made his way successfully in the world, but he had not done it by pushing others aside. He had succeeded by virtue of a massive solidity and strength which carried a power with them that none could deny, and now that he had reached middle age there was a dignified repose about him that seemed to lift him above the restless hurrying stream of journalistic life. He was an acknowledged king in the world of letters, and to serve under him was a greater honour than to rule in a smaller sphere.

Ralph Rhodes, it might have been thought, possessed a nature as antagonistic to his as Richard Weston's could possibly be, but those who thought so had only looked at the two men from the outside. Mr. Dudley-Hartnell had an eye that read men through and through, and beneath all the sub-editor's angularities and vehemences he found a strain of pure sincerity that gave him a real and deep regard for him. He considered Rhodes unformed and crude, and looked forward to the time when he would alter many of his opinions; but youth is a remediable disease, and when a dozen years had passed by he would be playing a useful part in the world. That he should leave the work he could do well for a work which he probably could not do at all, was a mistake that grieved his fatherly friend; but mistakes teach wisdom, and since he persisted in having his own way it was in vain to try and hinder him; and, moreover, his removal would put an end to the difficulty of having an ardent Radical attached to the staff of a journal which, though not strictly political, was, if anything, Conservative in its views and opinions.

But Weston was another kind of man altogether, and the editor shrank from the thought of being closely associated with him. It is possible to be strongly attracted towards a mistaken man so long as he is unselfish; but

when a man's life seems to be lived entirely for himself, it is hard to feel towards him anything but repulsion. If Richard had expended himself heart and soul in any cause, however faulty, Mr. Dudley-Hartnell would have felt a dawning kindness for him at once, but as it was he seemed self-sufficient and self-interested, pushing his way in the world for his own good and not that of his fellow-creatures.

If he could have seen the undercurrent of thought that was passing through Richard's mind as he sat, proofsheets in hand, he would have considered himself quite justified in his opinion. Hylda's desire to go out of town had been left ungratified, and Flo's request to be allowed to come and stay had been refused, simply that Richard might carry out his plans with regard to the sub-editorship. He knew that Rhodes would be away during September, and if only he played his cards well he might edge himself into his place before he returned, but he was quite aware that the game would not be an easy one, and he had several schemes in his mind by which to help it on.

The most helpful of these he proceeded to set on foot before he left the office that afternoon.

The editor was a widower, and those who remembered Mrs. Dudley-Hartnell spoke of her as a sweet and fairy-like creature who had filled her husband's life with rapture only to leave it empty again in little more than a year after their marriage. For her sake he had spent the rest of his life in solitude, but his grief had left a tender and not a hardened place in his heart, and many a young girl, trying to get a footing on the literary ladder, had had cause to bless the compassionate hand held out to her. Richard was shrewd enough to know that it would be useless for him to ask for the sub-editorship himself, but how would it be if the request came from Hylda's lips?

No thought of reluctance held him back from the idea; if he had not known that he was the right man for the post he told himself that he should never have tried to get it, but feeling assured that no one else could be half so valuable to Mr. Dudley-Hartnell, why should he not play upon the editor's feelings to obtain the boon that his judgment might have denied?

"I wonder whether you would be good enough to come and dine with us?" he said, when their work was finished for the day. "I should like to introduce you to my wife, and perhaps now that everybody is out of town you may have a little time to spare."

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell was quite impervious to flattery, and in a general way such a speech would have decided him to refuse the invitation, but he wanted a further opportunity of conversing with Richard before he committed himself, and it would be easier to do this in his own house than when they were subject to the constant interruptions of the office.

"I shall be very pleased to come," he said. •

"What night would suit you?" asked Richard, with inward elation.

"I have no engagement on Thursday or Friday."

"Shall we say Friday, then?" said Richard, thinking that perhaps it might be as well to give Hylda another day for preparation, and the editor agreeing, he went off in triumph.

"I saw Mr. Dudley-Hartnell to-day, Hylda," he said when he reached home, "and he has promised to dine here on Friday. You must have a good dinner, for he visits at all the best houses."

"Why did you ask him?" said Hylda, who was looking at her husband with rather a startled expression.

"I had a very good reason," said Richard. "You needn't stare at me in that terrified way; he is an awfully good-natured old fellow, though he is such a swell. I hoped to get him, and so I would not have Flo here just now; she would not be in his style at all, but he thinks a great deal of a pretty face, and you must make yourself as charming as you can."

Hylda gave a little shiver; remarks like these always created a feeling within her that she did not care to analyse.

"I did not know that you had been to the office lately," she said.

"I have not been until to-day. The chief has been away for six weeks, and there was no use in wasting my

sweetness on the desert air. But he came back on Monday, which accounts for my being there on Tuesday."

He spoke laughingly, but Hylda's face did not relax.

"I suppose you mean that you are still hankering after that sub-editorship?" she said.

Richard's brow darkened. "Look here, Hylda," he said, "I will not have you use such words to me. To say that a man is hankering after a thing is to imply that he is hanging on to something that he cannot get. Now I can get this sub-editorship, and I mean to get it, and that is the whole story."

"Then why have you asked Mr. Dudley Hartnell to dinner?"

"If you think that a man like that is to be bought by a dinner, you know very little about him," said Richard, angrily, then suddenly remembering what he wanted from his wife he changed his tone.

"You seem to have grown very careless about me," he said; "there was a time when you could not show enough interest in me and my affairs. Of course, I know that you were making up to me then, but still I should have thought that even now you would have been glad to get a chance of helping me."

Hylda's heart throbbed angrily at this speech, but its sting lay in its truth, and much as she might resent its bad taste she knew that she had laid herself open to it, therefore her anger must remain unspoken.

"What is it that you want me to do?" she asked, and Richard knew by her voice that she had come off her high horse, as he expressed it.

"I only want you to be charming to him," he said, "which is tantamount to saying that I want you to be yourself. If the subject of the *Review* comes up you can tell him in confidence that you know I have set my heart on the post."

"Shall you be going to the office again before Friday?"

"I can't tell; probably not. I don't want to press myself upon him. But why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I only asked," she said, leaving the room without any further explanation.

Friday evening arrived in due course, and Hylda sat expecting her guest with a thoughtful look upon her face that had never been seen there before her marriage, but which only served to increase its beauty. She had never been unthinking, even in the days of her girlhood, but the thought that leaves its mark upon the face comes not from intellectual exercise, but from the actual experience of life. A deeper shade had crept into her eyes, and a paler tint into her cheek, and her smile had more of sweetness and less of gaiety.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell had too much self-control to show surprise at anything, but he could hardly help giving a start when he was ushered into the drawing-room, and found himself face to face with Mrs. Weston. He had never imagined that Weston's wife would be such a choice bit of womanhood as this; how came it that he had had the good taste and the good fortune to secure such a treasure? It showed that there must be much more in him than appeared on the surface.

Richard saw the impression that had been made, and he was proportionately gratified; this was what he had looked forward to when he made up his mind to marry, and it was worth attaining; a wife was certainly a very useful possession, and he congratulated himself once more on the promptitude and address that he had shown in the matter.

Hylda had been strongly tempted to withdraw into her shell for the evening, and say nothing that she could avoid saying; but even if she had had no fear of her husband before her eyes, she would not have been proof against the charm of Mr. Dudley-Hartnell's manner. Richard had seen him in many moods during his intercourse with him at the office, but he had never seen him in such a mood as this. There was something in the pure beauty of Hylda's face that seemed to appeal strongly to him, and he laid himself out for her benefit in a way that clever men and fashionable women had often sighed for in vain. Her reserve was soon melted, and she threw herself heart and soul into the conversation.

There was a distinct change in his manner towards

Richard when they were left together after dinner; he talked more freely than he had ever done before, and even consulted him on one or two points of detail connected with the *Review*. But Richard was not satisfied yet; he knew that more than this was required before he could feel himself safe, and he had another little plan up his sleeve.

"Are you too tired to sing something, Hylda?" he said, when they had drunk their tea. "I know that Mr. Dudley-Hartnell is fond of music."

Hylda went to the piano at once, but she had only struck a few notes when the maid appeared at the door, saying that a gentleman was in the study, who wanted to speak to the master on particular business.

"I shall only be a few minutes," said Richard, apologetically, but the few minutes expanded into half-an-hour, and the half-hour into an hour, and still he did not return.

Hylda sang one song after another, and Mr. Dudley Hartnell, who was not a critic like Mr. Chesterford, lay back in his chair and listened with mingled feelings that stirred his very heart's core. Many an evening such as this lay buried in his memories of the past, and as he looked across the dimly-lighted room to the piano, where the gleam of the candles shone upon the sweet young face beneath the curling hair, his eyes grew moist, and he shut them quickly to keep the tears from falling. Just so he had rested when he came home weary with work; just so the flowers had scented the room, and a strain of music had charmed away his fatigue and care. Wealth and power and place all lay in his hand to-day, and yet if he could have chosen he would have gone back to those early days with all their struggle and all their sweetness.

He roused himself with a sigh when Hylda rose at last from the piano, and looked at her without speaking as she came and sat down near him. His heart was very near his lips, and yielding to the impulse of the moment he spoke as he had not spoken for years.

"I shall not soon forget this evening," he said. "You have carried me back to the days of the past, and it has given me as much pleasure as pain. Never believe anyone

who tells you that love can die. That was not *love* which went!"

"Do you think then that love is worth more than all the world beside?" asked Hylde.

She flattered herself that she betrayed no emotion, but she did not know with what keen perceptions she was dealing; perhaps even if she had known it would not have hindered her.

"Yes, I do," he said; "but mortals call much by the name of love which is not love at all. I must not talk metaphysics, however," he added, rousing himself with a smile. "Do you know, Mrs. Weston, there is something in your voice that is very familiar to me, and yet I cannot tell who it reminds me of. At least, I daresay you will be amused by my saying so, but several times you have reminded me of the new member for Bennington."

"Sir Tristram Carlyle is my first cousin," said Hylde, "so it is not very wonderful that there should be some likeness between us."

"Is he indeed!" said Mr. Dudley-Hartnell, thinking to himself as he spoke that this explained the secret of Mrs. Weston's unexpected refinement, but that it made the fact of her marriage more inexplicable. "I have known Sir Tristram for some time, though we have not seen much of one another. I am looking forward to knowing him better now that he is in Parliament. He will do good work there, or I am much mistaken."

The sound of footsteps in the hall warned Hylde that her husband was returning, and she made haste to change the subject.

"I am very sorry to have been so long," he said as he entered, "but I could not get rid of that poor fellow. He is a broken-down author, Dakins by name, whom I came across at the library. I told him to come up some evening and unbosom his woes, so of course he comes just when I don't want him."

"It is very difficult to know what to do for people of that kind," said Mr. Dudley-Hartnell.

"Yes, it is; but one can't see a man going underneath without at least making an effort to save him. I have

been able to get him a job which may lead on to something permanent, but I must watch him carefully for a time and see what his capabilities really are."

"That is the kind of action that lightens one's own anxieties," said the editor, as he rose to go, in a more cordial tone than he generally used to Richard Weston.

He pondered deeply to himself as he drove homewards over the evening's experiences. For one thing he remembered that his sub-editor had contested the Bennington election, and the coincidence struck him as a strange one. He had a great regard for Sir Tristram Carlyle, and felt that Weston's connection with him was a decided point in his favour; while if the coveted post would save that sweet-eyed girl from any future trials, it would be worth while to give it to her husband.

It was a good thing for Richard's chances that the editor could not hear the conversation that followed his departure.

"Well, what did he say to you?" said Richard, coming back into the drawing-room after he had closed the front door on their visitor.

"He said a great many things," said Hylda, who was not disposed to retail all that had passed.

"Yes, yes; but about the sub-editorship."

"He did not say anything about that."

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Richard.

"Really, Hylda, you are rather too provoking. After I had told you specially what I wanted you to do, and took all the trouble to get that bore Dakins here, and left you alone and everything, for you to go and mull the whole thing like that!"

Hylda looked at him in undisguised dismay. "Richard, is that true?" she said faintly.

"True? I should just think it is. You are perfectly useless!"

"I did not mean that," she said, unheeding his rough words; "did you really arrange for that man to come here to-night, and then let Mr. Dudley-Hartnell think it was accidental?"

Richard looked rather ashamed. "I didn't intend to let



that out," he said. "You would never have known it if you had done your part properly. You must not think about that, every man does that kind of thing when he is put to it."

"I know one man who would not!" were the words that rushed to Hylda's lips, but she checked them in horror. What had happened to her that she should begin to make comparisons between Tristram and Richard? And why should she make comparisons, her heart answered defiantly. Had not Richard a hundred good qualities that Tristram did not possess?

"If he had given me any opening I would have taken it," she said, coming back to the matter in hand. "But I could not begin on such a subject myself, especially when he was telling me about his past sorrow."

"Oh! you got on that topic, did you?" said Richard, laughing. "Well, perhaps it will answer the purpose quite as well. You are a clever little diplomatist after all; how did you manage it?"

"I am going upstairs now, I feel tired," said Hylda. She could not reply to his question, it jarred her too much, and her only safety was in flight.

She had no sooner reached her bedroom, however, than she reproached herself for her cowardice. Why had she not stayed and faced the matter out once for all? She had been warned before her marriage of what she might expect, and she had waived the warning scornfully aside, feeling certain that she could guide her husband with a silken thread. What did it signify if he was not so refined and polished as the men she was accustomed to meet; would not her influence be all that was needed to raise him to a higher level? It had never crossed her mind that he might prove impervious to her influence; of course she should obey him, every good wife did that, but she should take care to mould his commands before he uttered them!

But now, although they had only been married a few months, she was obliged to own that all these schemes had come to nothing. Richard was much too well satisfied with himself to admit that he stood in need of any improvement, and even if he had done so, his wife would

have been the last person to whom he would have gone for aid. In his lectures on literature he had often pointed out the fact, that while Shakespeare's men grow and develop in character, his women, Minerva-like, are full-grown from the first, and never alter. "So it is in life," he had often said: "Man is continually growing and developing, while woman's part and capacity remains unchanged from her first creation."

This general principle he believed to be exemplified in his own experience. All the wealth of the ages was his by right, he reaped the harvest that past generations had sown; but Hylda was no further along the road of progress than Eve had been: her part in life was still to be a helpmeet, and the new woman was to him but a perennial reproduction of the old. His view might not be the fashionable one, but still he had plenty of supporters, foremost among whom he counted Tennyson:—

"Her faith is fixt and cannot move,  
She darkly feels him great and wise,  
She dwells on him with faithful eyes,  
I cannot understand—I love."

Happily for himself, he had not had occasion to touch upon this subject in his Stowbury course, or perhaps his success with Hylda would not have been so assured. She had found it out gradually, as the deference of courtship wore off, until now it stood before her in all its naked truth. She dared not tell him that his thoughts were not as her thoughts, nor his ways as her ways, he would only have replied with a scoff and a sneer; the only thing to be done was to accommodate herself to him, since it was quite hopeless that he would accommodate himself to her. In this she could only succeed by shutting her eyes resolutely to his faults; and, though she had begun to suspect that some of her opinions about him had been mere illusions, this only made her cling to her illusions more desperately; for, if they went, love would go with them.

Greatly to her relief, Richard did not bring up the subject of Mr. Dudley-Hartnell at breakfast next morning, and wishing to do something to please him she recurred to Flo's desire for an invitation.

"I am willing to have her whenever you like," said Hylda, "since we are not going out of town."

"Whether we go out of town or not depends on the sub-editorship," remarked Richard; "however, we won't discuss that now. If I don't get it, we shall have to go away, for I can't go back to the sickening grind of those lectures without having a change first. If I do get it, we'll have Flo up, and be jolly together."

"I hope you will get it," said Hylda, and Richard kissed her affectionately before he started out on his day's work.

He did not tell her where he was going, but he had made up his mind to call at the office with another offer of help, and see if the softening effect of last night's conversation still lingered in the editor's mind.

Hylda listened eagerly for him that evening, and went out into the hall to greet him when she heard his latch-key; she was glad that they were friends again, nothing would be so fearful as a breach between them.

"You are home rather earlier to-day," she said; "have you been at the library?"

He did not answer, but signed to her to go into the study, and she trembled apprehensively as he followed her in and shut the door.

"Look at that!" he said, in his harshest voice, flinging an envelope upon the table.

Hylda did not touch it, she knew only too well what it was, and she had been expecting this explosion for days.

"I did not put my own name to it, Richard," she said.

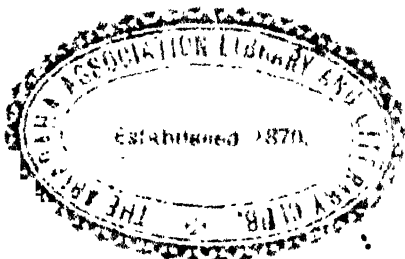
"A good thing you didn't, I can tell you!" he returned. "But what was the use of that when you gave this address? However, most luckily I went into the chief's room this morning as the clerks thought he was there, and I caught sight of this on a side-table. I knew your writing, and, as it was unopened, I put it in my pocket; a nice mess I should have been in if he had seen it. I should never have been able to look him in the face again. It is one of the essays out of that idiotic "Hours of Insight," I see. I thought you had burnt the whole affair long ago; you had better do it before you go to bed."

Hylda stood crushed and silent. She had built such hopes on her little venture; Richard would be compelled to acknowledge her powers when he saw her work in his much-vaunted *Review*, and she had pictured literary men bowing down before her while he looked on with mingled awe and admiration! It was too hard that it should have ended like this, and she could not hinder a sob as she took up her despised packet.

"Stop a moment," said Richard, as she was leaving the room, "I have something else to say to you. I told you before that you ought to give up writing altogether, but if you must go on with it in contradiction to my wishes, please keep it out of everybody's sight. A proceeding like this is too childish for anything, and if I were not so fond of you I should have lost all patience with you. A man's first business is to keep his wife from making a fool of herself, and you must be entirely guided by me for the future. The only comfort is that I hit upon it before it had been opened; if it had been seen in the office my chances would have been ruined for ever."

Hylda had her hand upon the door, and, as soon as he had finished speaking, she opened it; it was useless to answer him, even if she had had strength enough left to do so. The maid was just entering with a letter, and, as Richard tore it open, he uttered an exclamation that brought Hylda back to his side.

The letter was from Mr. Dudley-Hartnell, and contained an offer of the sub-editorship of the *Monthly Review*.



## CHAPTER XIV.

COUNTER-IRRITATION is a valuable remedy for many diseases, mental as well as physical. Mrs. Carlyle had been helpless against the power of Richard's personality, but when his presence was once removed she began to realise the position in which he had placed her, and had it not been for the necessity of doing battle with her sister-in-law she would hardly have been able to keep her head above water.

For the last few years she had been looking forward to a delightful prospect in which happiness and importance would be equally mingled, and now that it had been dashed from her grasp the only poor consolation left to her was to try and make Harriet believe that the loss was nothing. A long visit to Bath was imperative before she could face the situation, and when she first returned to the Manor everyone was occupied with the Bennington election, but since that was happily over and Tristram had gone to London, there was nothing to keep the two at arm's length.

Lady Carlyle might have graduated with honours in the art of annoying. She knew exactly how to plant her poisoned darts, and how to justify the wounds she inflicted. At the bottom of her heart she had a sincere sympathy with Cecilia's trouble, but as she generally designated Hylda as "your poor misguided girl," it was not wonderful that Cecilia insisted on denying that she was in any trouble at all.

This attitude, however, it was rather difficult to maintain when all her invitations to the newly-married pair were refused, and it became increasingly awkward to explain their non-appearance. If Richard and Hylda would

only have come down radiant with health and happiness, she could have kept up her courage in spite of everything, but as month after month passed away and there was still nothing but her bare word to vouch for their prosperity, she had hard work not to succumb before her sister-in-law's attacks.

The summer must bring them, however; no respectable people stayed in town in August, and there could be no excuse for their not coming to the Manor; she would have a series of garden parties and invite everybody she could lay hands on; it was a comfort that, in spite of his deficiencies, Richard had always plenty to say for himself.

But the summer passed away and still they did not come. Hylda felt very uncomfortable as she sent one evasive reply after another, but it was not possible to explain the real reason. Wounded pride was mixed with her wounded feeling. She did not wish her husband to be a toadeater, but still she felt that he ought to have been impressed with the privilege of being connected with an aristocratic family, and to her surprise and vexation he seemed determined to have as little to do with his wife's relations as possible.

"I suppose poor Hylda will be down before long?" said Lady Carlyle one afternoon when she had called in at the Manor on her way back from Stowbury.

She made this remark on principle every time she saw Cecilia, but though it had lost its freshness it had not by any means lost its sting.

"I don't think she will be here just yet," said Mrs. Carlyle, struggling to preserve her presence of mind. "I have heard from her to-day, and they are not able to leave town at present."

"That is what she has said all along, but I cannot say that it seems to me much of a reason."

"Not in itself, of course," said Mrs. Carlyle; "but the reasons that have prevented them from leaving town have been very important. First there was Richard's work, and then his sisters were going to stay with them."

"It just shows what kind of people they are that they should think of going to town in August," returned Lady

Carlyle, pausing to break a lance upon a side issue. "I suppose they would go by one of those summer excursions that I have seen advertised at railway stations—'five-shilling return tickets, Yarmouth to London.' I am sure I hope they enjoyed their visit!"

"They did not go after all," said Cecilia, guilelessly falling into the trap. "I could not quite make out why, but Hylda said they had been obliged to put them off."

"Indeed!" said Lady Carlyle triumphantly. "You see, dear, it is just as I said; your poor girl is obliged to catch at any straw to get out of your invitations!"

"I can't think how you can say such things!" burst out Cecilia, the angry tears filling her eyes. "You seem to have no natural feeling at all! One would think, being a mother yourself, you would know better how I feel about it. Why, even Nelson said to me the other day——" But here sobs drowned her voice.

Lady Carlyle looked at her complacently. To see Cecilia helplessly giving herself away always put her in good humour.

"I am sure I am quite ready to sympathise with you," she said, "only you never will accept my condolences. It must be very trying for you to have the very servants noticing how Hylda neglects you."

"She does not neglect me!" cried Cecilia, distracted at finding what an advantage she had given to the enemy. "She would have been here now if Richard had not got a new appointment. It is a very good one indeed. Other people think him a rising man even if you don't."

"That is exactly what I always did think him," said Lady Carlyle. "I consider him a typical specimen of a self-raised man. But I am glad to hear he has got an appointment," she added, feeling that she had gone rather too far. "Is it something under Government?"

"Not exactly," said poor Cecilia. "I believe it is connected with a paper; but I did not quite understand about it."

"Oh, I see," said Lady Carlyle, majestically, "something like young Brown, who reports for the *Stowbury Gazette*. Well, I hope he will get on nicely with it. You

must have been very pleased to hear of it, I am sure, dear. But I must not forget to tell you my little piece of news. Tristram's godfather is dead, and has left him fifty thousand pounds."

"To him that hath shall be given!" were the words that passed through Mrs. Carlyle's mind; but they were not words that would have seemed appropriate to Tristram himself. Having lost what he valued most, it mattered little to him what else was given or taken away. If Hylda had been his wife, the money would have been welcome; but, as it was, he cared little for it; he could have done perfectly well without it, but, since it had come to him, he must put it to use; and, having arranged his affairs on a more satisfactory footing at the Court, he resolved to take a house in London, and throw himself more completely into political life. Bachelor's chambers were all very well for a time, but as his work increased, he found his quarters too small for him; and now that he could afford it, there was no reason why he should not be comfortably housed.

House-hunting was a dreary business, however, when all the time unbidden thoughts were rising in his mind of what Hylda would have wished, and thought, and suggested; and he was thankful to accept a proposal from his mother that she should come up and settle the business for him, while he took a much-needed holiday. It was one of the things that she could do to perfection, and woe betide the unfortunate house agent or furniture dealer who attempted to get the better of her.

Lady Carlyle was all energy at once; not only would she have a congenial task in hand, but she could at the same time carry out a little plan of her own. She had long felt that the mysteries of Hylda's married life ought to be unravelled. Tristram, of course, could not do it, and Cecilia was quite incapable; the duty must, therefore, devolve upon herself.

As soon as her son had taken his departure for Scotland, she started off upon her expedition, and, with a man and maid in her train, took up her abode at the family hotel where she was accustomed to stay during her visits to London. For some days after her arrival she was too



busy to think of her niece. Tristram had left her a list of likely houses, and she was obliged to visit them all before she could make a decision; but having at last fixed upon the one that seemed to answer best to his requirements, she felt that she might indulge herself with a holiday before she entered upon the work of furnishing.

Flo Weston had not bargained for her elder sister's company, when she asked for an invitation to Beryl Villa. She was very fond of Ellen, but she wanted to "cut a dash" while she was in London, as she expressed it, and her sister's presence would be a decided handicap. Such a handicap was, however, precisely what Hylda wanted; she felt that she could not undertake the boisterous Florence without someone to act as a check upon her, and, therefore, she asked her husband to extend the invitation. Richard was nothing loth, and Ellen, who was anxious to see something of philanthropic work in London, gladly consented.

Hylda's little drawing-room seemed quite crowded when two or three people were collected in it, and on the evening after her guests' arrival, there was scarcely room to move. Greatly to her dismay, Jo Weston had chosen to escort his sisters to London, and instead of showing him that he had taken a liberty, Richard had insisted on his remaining a second night; he had been out with his brother in the afternoon, and at tea-time they had returned, bringing Mr. Rhodes with them.

Conversation was at a flood tide. Ellen was seriously catechising Mr. Rhodes as to his views on Pauperism and Old Age Pensions, while Flo chattered incessantly into his other ear. Richard was listening with much amusement, encouraging Flo's nonsense, and enjoying his friend's surprise at Ellen's information; while Jo, lolling on the sofa at Hylda's side, was telling her that he had been half over London that day without seeing such a pretty face as hers.

"Hullo! Here's a grand turn-out pulling up at your gate!" he exclaimed suddenly, starting up from his inelegant attitude, "I told Flo to bring all her smartest gewgaws, for she would be safe to meet some of the nobs, and here they come right enough! My eye, what a funny

old girl! I say, Hylda, do come and look at her! She's just like a cockatoo with a bonnet on."

Hylda gave one look, then rising hastily from her seat, she went over to her husband.

"Richard!" she said in a low tone of consternation, "what shall we do, my aunt is coming in!"

She had had some unreasoning hope that he would sweep all the visitors to the four points of the compass, but she was doomed to disappointment; he only shrugged his shoulders, and a look of decided ill-humour came over his face.

"She won't like this kind of thing at all," whispered Hylda under cover of Flo's loud voice.

"Well, she is only an ordinary human being," said Richard sulkily; "she can't expect to have the streets of conversation cleared for her."

Hylda turned away from him hopelessly, and at that moment the door opened, and the maid announced, "Lady Carlyle."

Ralph Rhodes started; he had been quite unconscious that anyone was approaching, and to find himself suddenly face to face with the mother of his late rival was disturbing in the extreme; he had made up his mind that Tristram's title was the sole cause of his success, and Lady Carlyle had no sooner entered the room than one of his worst moods settled down upon him.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said, giving Hylda a frigid salute: "I am staying in town for a little while, and thought that I would come and look you up, as you seem to have quite deserted us."

"It was very good of you," said Hylda, keeping her aunt's hand in her own, for now that they met face to face, a thousand remembrances of the past began to pull at her heartstrings.

"I do not call that kind of thing *goodness*," said Lady Carlyle severely; "it is no more than a duty."

"Which implies that it is not a pleasure," observed Richard.

Hylda wished that he would be silent; things were awkward enough already without his making them more so.

"Come and sit on the sofa with me, Aunt Harriet," she said. "How was mamma when you saw her last? Have you come straight from Stowbury?"

The last words were lost in a noisy burst of laughter from the group near the window, and Lady Carlyle put up her eyeglass that she might examine the other occupants of the room.

"I did not know that you thought of standing for Parliament," she said, turning to Richard.

"I have no intention of such a thing," returned Richard, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, indeed! I thought these must be some of your possible constituents."

"They are my sisters and my brother," said Richard haughtily; "will you allow me to introduce them, or perhaps you would rather be introduced to Mr. Ralph Rhodes, who hopes to contest Sir Tristram Carlyle's seat again at the next opportunity."

Lady Carlyle felt that she had put herself in the wrong, and was obliged to confess, as she had done in her former encounter with Richard, that he was not an easy person to trample on.

"I shall be very glad to see them presently," she said, "but I must have a little talk with Hylda first; I have a great deal to say to her."

Richard walked off with his head in the air; he felt that he had asserted himself successfully, and he was not disposed to make terms with his antagonist.

The little storm seemed to have cleared the sky, for Lady Carlyle had much rectitude in her composition, and nothing made her so agreeable as the conviction that she had been in the wrong. Instead of administering the caustic reproofs with which she had come prepared, she talked amicably to her niece, telling her pieces of Stowbury news, and commenting kindly upon her pale looks. Hylda, in fact, had much ado to restrain her tears; a strange yearning after her old home seemed to be sapping her self-command, while all the time she was in an agony of suspense as to what would happen next. Mr. Rhodes had no respect of persons, and though his independence was

too sincere to be despised, it certainly made him at times a most alarming companion. He showed his contempt for the aristocracy on the present occasion by inciting Flo to the wildest extravagances, and Hylda looked more and more uncomfortable as jokes and laughter followed each other in a crescendo of merriment. She glanced appealingly at Richard, but he kept his head carefully turned away, and though he did not actually join in the proceedings, he made no attempt to stop them.

Lady Carlyle rose at last from her seat, saying with a majestic air of displeasure, "I must try and see you at some time when you are less engaged; can you not come and lunch with me some day?"

"I shall be very glad," said Hylda, determined to accept the invitation before her husband had time to interfere.

"Come to-morrow then, for I cannot quite tell when I shall be leaving town."

"I will come if I possibly can," said Hylda, "but with visitors in the house ——"

"Visitors!" broke in Flo, who had caught the last words. "There, Mr. Rhodes, did you hear that? Does your sister-in-law call you a visitor when you are in her house?"

"How do you know I have a sister-in-law?" returned Mr. Rhodes; "have you been inquisitive enough to ask Weston questions about me?"

Flo burst out laughing. "Questions about you? Well, what next I should like to know! As if I had ever troubled my head about you."

"Richard, will you see if the carriage is there?" said Hylda. The strain was becoming more than she could bear, and putting her hand through her aunt's arm she led her from the room.

"Well, she's got queer manners!" said Flo. "She stared at me as if she'd never seen a girl in a coat and tie before! I flatter myself my get-up's rather fetching, all the same! What do you think, Mr. Rhodes?"

"It is quite time to go and dress for dinner," said Hylda, coming back and putting an end to any further discussion.

She could not let herself dwell on what had passed, it was too mortifying, and by way of stifling the recollection she began to plan an escape for the next day. A strange look passed over her face as she remembered how she had planned and schemed to meet Richard in the past; it was certainly one of Time's revenges that she should have to plan and scheme to meet her own people now.

"What are you going to do with yourselves to-day?" asked Richard, as he greeted his sisters next morning.

"I don't know," said Flo, "I want to see whatever there is to be seen."

"There is not very much at this time of year," said Richard, "but I have borrowed some tickets for the Royal Botanic. Suppose you take them there, Hylda?"

"Very well," said Hylda. She felt herself to be a deceiver, but there was no help for it, apparently; she could not risk a collision, for, if he told her not to go, she should only disobey him. She would tell him all about it afterwards, and so satisfy her conscience.

"I have an engagement in town, this morning," she said, as soon as he had left the house, taking Jo with him on his way back to Yarmouth. "I promised my aunt to lunch with her at her hotel, but I will meet you at Regent's Park at four o'clock."

"I don't know that I care to go out to-day," said Ellen. "I feel quite tired out."

"I think you had better try and come, if you can," said Hylda; "the gardens are very quiet, and the air will do you good."

Ellen said no more, and, as soon as she had despatched her household business, Hylda went into the drawing-room.

"I have given orders for your lunch to be ready at half-past one," she said, "and the maid will fetch a cab for you when it is time to start."

"What time did you say that you were going to leave the hotel?" asked Flo.

"I shall leave soon after three, I expect; but, anyway, I shall be waiting for you at four o'clock."

She heaved a sigh of relief as she left the house behind her and started on her solitary way. It seemed incredible

that the thought of meeting her aunt could cause her such gladness, and yet there was no doubt that she had not felt so lighthearted for weeks.

Lady Carlyle had not been prepared for the effect that the sight of her niece had had upon her. In old days, she had looked upon Hylda with coldness and severity, and had regarded her as quite unworthy of the honour of being Tristram's bride; but when she beheld her amid her new surroundings, she seemed to see Hylda, for the first time, as she was; and if she had been of a poetical turn of mind, she would have compared herself to the attendant spirit gazing on the lady among the rabble crew of Comus!

She had declared that Hylda's marriage should banish her from her regard for ever; but, strangely enough, it seemed, instead, to be the first step towards affection.

She made no allusion to the unpleasant experiences of the preceding day, when her niece arrived, and they sat down to lunch with a more cordial feeling towards each other than had ever animated them before. They found plenty to talk about, without touching on dangerous topics, and Hylda felt that she had never yet done her aunt justice.

Luncheon was nearly over when their *tête-à-tête* received an unexpected interruption; there was a sound of footsteps outside, the door opened without any preliminary knock, and Sir Tristram walked into the room!

It was an awkward moment for all three, but, perhaps, on the whole, Lady Carlyle was the most taken aback. Hylda had been feeling such a renewal of the old familiar atmosphere that it seemed no more than natural to see her cousin, while Tristram had succeeded so little as yet in eradicating Hylda's image from his heart, that he had never lost his surprise at finding his world empty of her presence.

But Lady Carlyle had told her son that she never wished to look upon Hylda's face again, and though she had not pained him by constantly reverting to the subject, she had let him know, in spite of her silence, that she had no intention of forgiving the offender. It was distinctly embarrassing, therefore, to be found in friendly converse

with her, and she wished that her son had been good enough to remain in Scotland.

"My dear Tristram, how you startled me!" she said, as soon as she recovered breath enough to speak. "Why have you come in such an unexpected way?"

"I was obliged to come up on business," said Tristram. "I forgot to telegraph until after the train had started, but I thought I would come here on the chance of finding you. I must only stay a few minutes, as I am on my way to the Home Office."

He had scarcely looked at Hylda, and she rose and took up her gloves.

"I must be going now," she said. "I have to meet my sisters-in-law at Regent's Park at four o'clock."

Lady Carlyle gave a little shudder at the thought, but it was rather a relief that Hylda had some engagement to put an end to the awkwardness of the situation, and she said nothing to detain her.

"How are you going," asked Tristram, as he held the door open for her.

"I shall take a cab," said Hylda.

"I will see you into one," said Tristram.

It was painful in the extreme to him to be with her, but he would not treat her with less courtesy than he would have done if she had been a stranger. He felt tongue-tied as he walked beside her down the broad staircase. In the old days he had a million things to tell her if they were only separated for a few weeks, but though so much had happened since their last meeting, he felt that there was nothing he could say. When two lives have been thus wrenched apart, the rest is silence.

Not a word would have passed between them if Hylda had not forced herself to speak.

"I must congratulate you on your good fortune," she said, as they reached the hall.

"My good fortune?" said Tristram, hearing the words in a bewildered way, but not understanding them.

"Yes; I have just been hearing about your legacy."

"Have you? It was scarcely worth talking about."

Such a thing as an increase of income seemed so utterly

worthless to him at the present moment that he wondered how she could speak of it; but Hylda misinterpreted his meaning, and believing that he was vexed at her having presumed to discuss his affairs, she drew herself up and said no more.

The cab was called, and Tristram went out to see his cousin off, feeling the miserable weight still upon his tongue.

"Here you are!" cried a voice behind them. "I have been waiting here quite ten minutes; I thought you would turn up before long!"

Tristram looked indignantly at the intruder. This tall, bouncing girl, dressed in an exaggeration of the prevailing fashion, with her unrefined voice and gestures, must be suffering from some strange delusion when she claimed Hylda's acquaintance. But even as the thought crossed his mind, Hylda turned towards him with quiet dignity.

"This is Miss Weston," she said. "We had better start at once, Florence, or we shall be late."

She just touched her cousin's hand, and bowed to him gravely as they drove away; but as soon as he was out of sight she turned to her sister-in-law:

"How is it that you came to the hotel?" she said. "And where, is Ellen? I arranged to meet you at the Gardens."

"Ellen had a headache," said Flo, not at all abashed by her reproving tone, "so I came out and amused myself a bit."

"But it is not safe to alter plans in that way, we might have missed, and then what would you have done?"

"Oh, I'd have found my way all right; I'm not such a baby as all that. But I say, Hylda, what a sly little puss you are! 'Going to lunch with my aunt!' Oh! yes, I daresay! No wonder you didn't want me to turn up and spoil sport."

"I don't know what you mean," said Hylda, coldly. "My cousin happened to be there, and saw me down to the door; there is nothing in that."

"Oh, no, of course not," returned Flo; "but a little



bird told me a pretty story about that same cousin. The titles are not to have it all their own way, and a clever brain and a black moustache can sometimes get the better of them ! ”

“ Do you mean that Richard has dared to say anything to you about my cousin ? ” said Hylda, in a choked voice.

“ If you think there’s anything that Dick wouldn’t *dare*, you don’t know him, that’s all. Why shouldn’t he tell us the tale, either ? It’s as good as a penny novelette any day. But I’ll just see what he says when he hears of this new chapter ! Let me see, what shall I call it ? ‘ The Bride and the Baronet. ’ How does that sound ? ”

“ It sounds like yourself—heartless and vulgar,” was the answer that Hylda would have liked to have given, but controlling herself with an effort, she said nothing. She dreaded the effect of Flo’s tasteless jokes upon Richard, but she would rather have cut out her tongue than have asked her to keep silence on the subject ; she must speak to him first herself, and then his sister might say what she liked.

That walk in the Botanical Gardens remained in Hylda’s mind, as one of the nightmares of her life, to the end of her days. Flo cared nothing for plants or flowers and passed through one conservatory after another, commenting on the appearance of all whom they met until Hylda felt utterly sick. The only comfort was that Flo did not much mind whether she got any reply or not ; so long as she could hear her own voice she was very well amused, and Hylda was at liberty to pursue her own thoughts as she walked beside her. But when she insisted on going up a wooded knoll to look at the view and managed to drop her parasol at the feet of a gentleman who was coming up, Hylda felt that she could risk no more, and breaking off the voluble thanks for its return that seemed likely to lengthen into a conversation, she hurried away to the nearest entrance and called a cab.

She was relieved to find that Flo had turned sulky and would not speak, for it gave her time to think over what she was going to say to her husband ; it was still only six

o'clock and she should have plenty of time to speak to him before dinner.

But when they reached the house she found that he had not yet returned, and to her vexation the clock struck half-past seven before he came in.

"I am sorry I am so late," he said, putting his head in at the drawing-room door, "you go and begin and I will come as soon as I have washed my hands."

Hylda's heart sank; there was no hope now unless her sister-in-law's ill-temper kept her silent all the evening.

If she had known her better she would not have expected such a thing. Flo's first thought when she had been thwarted in any of her little plans was revenge, and she was thankful now to feel that she had such a powerful weapon in reserve. She bided her time until the dessert was put upon the table, but as soon as they were alone she took advantage of a momentary silence.

"You haven't asked us yet what we've been doing," she said.

"I know what you've been doing," said Richard. "How did you like the Botanic?"

"You think you are very clever, no doubt," said his sister, ignoring his question, "but you don't know everything. I had a nice little adventure first."

"What do you mean?" asked Richard, who was always ready to be amused by Flo's nonsense.

"Well, I went to a certain hotel, and there I saw a certain young lady coming out with a certain young gentleman. It was a very pretty sight, I can tell you, Dick, and it was a great pity you were not there to see."

"What rubbish are you talking now?" said Richard, upon whose mind no idea of her meaning had yet dawned; but chancing to look across at his wife, he saw that her face was white and her eyes strangely dilated. A new thought flashed upon him, and he spoke in a tone that startled his sister.

"Where have you been to, Hylda? Tell me at once."

Hylda answered calmly, in spite of her inward agitation:

"I have been to lunch with my aunt," she said. "My

cousin came in unexpectedly on business, and Florence saw him putting me into a cab."

"Unexpectedly!" hissed Richard, between his teeth.

Hylda quivered as though she had been shot; her husband's look and manner revealed him in a new aspect to her, and, for the moment, she felt more contempt than pain.

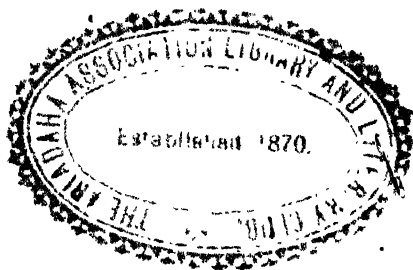
"We had better talk of this at another time," she said, and rising from her chair, she swept out of the room.

Ellen got up, and followed her, but Flo sat resolutely on, taking not the slightest notice of Hylda's surprised glance.

"Now, I'll tell you all about it," she said in her loudest tone, as the door was closing, and Hylda drew a long, shivering breath, and clasped her hands together.

"You must not think too much of what Flo says," said Ellen, leading her sister-in-law to a chair, and taking her hand in a kind pressure, "She lets her tongue run away with her, but you will find that a few words from you will put things right with Richard."

Hylda turned away proudly for a moment, then letting her sorrow get the better of her, she hid her tearful face upon Ellen's shoulder. She had no hope herself that things would be so easily put right as Ellen seemed to suppose, but she felt that she was a person to be trusted, and forgetting the estimation in which she had once held her, she clung to her as though she had found a support on which she could lean.



## CHAPTER XV.

SIR TRISTRAM concluded his business satisfactorily at the Home Office that afternoon; he went over the new house with his mother; he dined at the hotel, and went afterwards to his club to keep an appointment with a constituent; he went to bed at two, and got up again at four to be in time to catch the Scotch mail, and all the time he gave himself not a moment for thought.

But when he had once started on his journey, he found that sleep refused to come at his call, and that his brain would no longer be controlled. If he had known of the meeting in store for him, no power on earth would have dragged him to it, and yet was it not better that the first plunge should be over?

He had seen her again, and the image that he had cherished so long in his heart was gone for ever.

The bright-faced, light-hearted girl whom he had loved so long had passed away, and in her stead he saw a woman with depths in her eyes that he did not dare to fathom. What was it that had caused the change? Six months of happiness would have left her where it had found her; some other and deeper experience must have befallen her.

He had never expected that her future would be a blissful one, and he had hardly even hoped for it, for to have found nothing but happiness in her life with Richard would have meant that she had sunk to his level. But now that he had seen that haunting look in her eyes he would have given everything that he possessed if only he could have numbed her soul to suffering.

He longed and yet he feared to penetrate the secrets of her lot. What nameless sorrows had she to endure—what hidden trials to combat? But why should he seek to know, for in any case he was powerless to aid: he could only stand outside her prison door and picture the terrors within.

He roused himself at last with a shrug of the shoulders; how could he tell that all this was not a figment of the brain? Very possibly Hylda was as happy as the day was long, and he was building all this fabric on the foundation of a natural awkwardness at meeting him again. Of course it could not have been pleasant for her, and no doubt when she got home she told her husband all about it, and claimed his sympathy in consequence. He bit his lip as he thought of it, and ground his heel upon the carriage floor.

But it was not possible that he should cherish such anger long; in spite of all reasoning, in spite of all arguments, he knew that Hylda was unhappy, and he almost regretted now that he had not encouraged his mother to speak more openly. Lady Carlyle had felt bound to make up for her apparent inconsistency by indulging in some very stinging remarks. She told Tristram that she felt it was only due to his aunt to try and find out a little about Hylda, and that when she visited Beryl Villa she saw such a sad spectacle that she could do no less than ask her to come to the hotel for a little quiet conversation.

What was that sad spectacle? With a savage delight in tearing open his wound he set himself to conjecture. Had Lady Carlyle broken in upon a domestic quarrel? Was Richard abusing his wife, perhaps even striking her? He had turned away from his mother without asking a question, fearing to hear what she might have to tell; but now he wished with heart and soul that he had been less of a coward.

After a time, however, his common-sense came back to him; he knew Richard well enough to feel certain that he would not make common talk of his disagreements even if he had them, and he knew his mother too well not to be

quite aware that the sight of such a young woman as he had met yesterday would be quite enough to constitute a "sad spectacle" in her eyes. He might as well console himself by putting the best face upon the matter, for even if Hylda was in trouble there was nothing that he could do for her; he could never help her now, and as the train sped northwards the wheels reverberated with the "never, never, never," of hopeless despair.

As soon as Lady Carlyle returned to the Court she hastened over to call on her sister-in-law. She had written to tell her that she had seen Hylda, but had reserved all details until they met. Cecilia was longing to hear what she had to tell, and yet jealous that she should have to hear it; she knew that, however good the news might be, Harriet would infect it somehow with a bitter flavour, and she felt more than ordinarily nervous as she saw the carriage drive up.

Lady Carlyle knew perfectly well what Cecilia's was feeling, and she greeted her with much grim satisfaction; it was very sad, of course, that she should be so severely punished, but then what would become of the world if punishment was not dealt out to those who deserved it? "Justice before all things" was her motto, and she flattered herself that she carried it out very successfully.

She knew that Mrs. Carlyle would not dare to ask a question about her daughter, and so, like a cat with a mouse, she played with her fears for awhile, telling her about the new house and describing the glories of its furniture and decoration.

"It is a great contrast to Beryl Villa," she said at last.

Cecilia started, much as the mouse does when it feels the first pat of the cruel paw upon its back.

"Of course they had to begin in a small house," she said, "it was very wise of them to do so."

"Very wise," assented Harriet, "I am so glad that you see that, dear. I know you cannot help your natural leaning to extravagance, but it would have been fatal if you had encouraged your poor daughter in it. With such a set of people as she has round her the only thing for her to do is to keep out of sight."

"What people do you mean? You only spoke of seeing Hylda in your letter."

"I did not want to harrow your feelings in writing," said Harriet, who had apparently no objection to doing so by word of mouth. "I was so glad you were not with me; of course it was painful for me, but not nearly so painful as it would have been for you."

"But do tell me what you mean?" cried poor Cecilia, tortured beyond endurance. "You make things much worse by your way of telling them."

Lady Carlyle could not resist a little smile; she despised flattery, but she was not proof against such a compliment as this, though she felt that humility required her to disclaim it.

"It would not be possible to make this worse than it was," she said; "really, it was no wonder that Hylda looked pale and confused, for such a collection of objectionable people I never saw in my life before."

"Was Hylda looking pale?" cried Mrs. Carlyle, ignoring all the rest of the sentence. "She has never spoken of being unwell."

"Oh, she seems to be quite well as far as health goes. I don't think anyone could be surprised at her feeling embarrassed when I went in, it must have been a very awkward moment for me to appear."

"I don't see much in that," said Cecilia, determined to show fight as long as she could, "anyone may have objectionable callers, and, no doubt, there are all sorts of people living in a place like St. John's Wood."

"No doubt," said Lady Carlyle, drily; "but these people did not live in St. John's Wood, they were Mr. Weston's relations from Yarmouth."

There was a little pause while she looked about her complacently, and poor Cecilia gasped for breath.

"I had Hylda to lunch at the hotel with me," she went on at length; "I felt that I should like to make some little amends to her for the disadvantage at which she had been placed, but I did not pain her by any allusion to it, and of course she was only too thankful to be silent."

Lady Carlyle had spent some time in finding a

justification for her act of relenting towards her niece, and she had at last hit upon the idea of making it appear as an amends for the mortification that Hylda had been compelled to undergo. It satisfied her conscience, but it hardly satisfied Cecilia's heart, and the two parted on terms more strained than ordinary.

Tristram knew perfectly well what kind of account of her daughter Mrs. Carlyle would receive, but he understood the family politics too well to intercede on her behalf; his mother felt that she was only carrying out the decrees of Providence, and any interference would only have seemed to her impious in the extreme. But though he could not shield the victim from her blows, he could apply a healing balm afterwards; he had never spoken to his aunt of Hylda since the wedding day, but it was time that this selfishness should end.

He made an early visit to the Manor after his return, and found his aunt in the drawing-room. The autumn evening was closing in, and he felt a thrill of compassion as he saw her sitting alone in the gloomy room.

"Oh, Tristram, my dear, I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "I began to think that I should never see anyone to speak to again."

Tristram kissed her affectionately, and, sitting down by her side, he listened with patience to her narration of the many little household affairs that she had now no one to take an interest in.

"I think I shall have to go away for the winter, it is so lonely now," she said, but there she stopped; in spite of her absorption in her own feelings she remembered that she ought not to speak to him of Hylda.

Tristram, however, would not let the opening slip. "I don't wonder that you feel being alone," he said; "I suppose you have heard that I have seen Hylda twice?"

"No, I have not," said Mrs. Carlyle.

"I saw her first at the Foreign Office reception," said Tristram, going on bravely now the ice was once broken; "she was looking very well and very bright. Then I saw her again the day she lunched with my mother, but only for a few minutes as she was going on to meet some friends."



Mrs. Carlyle looked at him eagerly ; his news was to her like water in the desert, and the sympathetic tone in which he uttered it soothed her wounded spirit.

"I have not seen Weston," he went on, "but I met a friend the other day, a Mr. Dudley-Hartnell, who is one of the best fellows I know, and he told me that he has given him a berth in his office. Weston is very lucky, for there are plenty of men who would be glad to be in his place."

He got up as he finished speaking ; he had mentioned the facts, but he could not bear a discussion of them afterwards.

His aunt put her hand on his arm as he said good-bye, "You are very good to me, Tristram," she said, in a trembling voice, and Tristram went away without attempting any reply.

He had said not a word to her of the change that he had noticed in Hylda's looks at their second meeting ; it would be cruel to disturb her with what was after all only a surmise of his own, and the best thing for himself was to try and believe in it as little as he could.

If Tristram could have had a glimpse behind the scenes at Beryl Villa, he would, however, have found it even more difficult than he did at present to belie his fears. Flo's mischief-making had not produced any open rupture ; she had soon forgotten it again, as she had more important affairs in hand, and if she had been asked she would have said that Richard remembered it as little as herself. Hylda, however, could have told a different tale ; she had never re-opened the subject, for it was too painful to be spoken of unless it was absolutely forced upon her, but she knew perfectly well that it was vividly present to her husband's mind. She saw the suspicious glance with which he scanned her letters ; she noticed the determined way in which he questioned her about her daily plans and arrangements, and her heart swelled as she realised that he distrusted her. It was some time before she would allow it, such a thing was too hideous for belief, and she racked her brains to think of some other explanation of his conduct, but day by day he showed more clearly what his thoughts were, and she wondered sadly what she could do to dispel them.

It was long since she had felt any inclination to touch her books, but one day happening to take up a volume of Bacon's works, it opened at the Essay on Suspicion. "There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little, and therefore men should remedy suspicion by procuring to know more and not to keep their thoughts in smother."

She read the words attentively; perhaps they were heaven sent, and if she followed their advice and spoke openly to her husband she might put an end to their unhappy division, but as she cast her eye to the top of the page it lit on a sentence that disheartened her—"Suspicions among thoughts are like bats among birds, they ever fly by twilight."

That Richard could entertain suspicions of her proved that the sun of love had set, and that twilight had gathered over their lives; unless she could relight the sun she could not dispel the shadowy thoughts that hovered in the gloom. In such a case speech was worse than useless, it would only accentuate what was as yet vague and formless; let him suspect what he liked, it was the fact that he could suspect her at all that wrung her heart.

"No tongue can mend such pleadings; faith, requited  
With falsehood,—love, at last aware  
Of scorn,—hopes early blighted."

But here she checked herself; her bitter thoughts were outstepping the truth, and if light was ever to dawn upon them it could only be from a clear estimate of what had caused the darkness. It was not true to say that Richard had requited her faith with falsehood nor that he scorned her love; he had revealed himself as he was from the first, but her eyes had been blinded and she had not seen; nor did he now complain that she loved too well and wearied too long, for his jealousy showed that he still valued her affection.

When Richard, in the days of their courtship, had told her that she would have to submit to him in everything, and that he should punish her if she disobeyed, she had nestled her head against his shoulder and thought that his love-making was as delightful as it was original; but now

that she found his words were not bright-coloured fancies but hard and impenetrable facts, they were another aspect in her eyes.

Like many another pair their married life had begun in unison, but no two lives can go on thus to the end, and as interests develop and widen, unison must change into harmony or else it will inevitably fall into discord. Hylda recognised this truth though she had never put it into words, but she knew well that her husband would never acknowledge it. His idea of married life was neither one of harmony nor discord: it was unison plain and simple, and nothing else would satisfy him. She had not even the poor consolation of reproaching him with having deceived her: he had told her so all along; and the only thing to be done was to accept the position. At least she retained his love, and doubtless many and many a neglected wife would be thankful to change with her; to live with a man whose love was dead was a fate far more terrible than the one which she had to encounter, and instead of repining she ought to be bracing herself up with cheerful courage for the life before her.

That she could take this view of the situation showed that she had advanced many steps on the road of experience. A year ago, if she was thwarted in her wants and wishes, she had called heaven and earth to witness that she was cheated of her just rights; but now the universe seemed to her no longer a place created for her personal environment, the enlarging of her life had taught her humility, and she began to look upon herself as an insignificant atom in the world rather than as an important factor.

The lesson was wholesome, but it was not altogether pleasant; still, Hylda could have borne it if she could only have preserved her belief in her husband's greatness. It was the loss of this that took the colour from her cheeks and the light from her eyes; she had regarded him as better and nobler than all other men, and now she was forced to acknowledge that he was nothing more than a very faulty piece of humanity, with plenty of weeds where she had thought only to find flowers.

It was for her a time of cruel test and trial, but it would have been harder to bear even than it was, if Ellen's unobtrusive sympathy had not done something to relieve it.

The sisters had at first been asked to stay a fortnight, but the time had slipped away and they still remained at Beryl Villa. Hylda was only too willing to keep them; she shrank from the thought of being alone with Richard, and Ellen's presence was a safeguard. Her relations with Flo were not quite so comfortable, but they did not come much into collision, for having wreaked her petty spite Flo had turned aside to her own affairs.

"How happy could I be with either," was not a passing mood with the younger Miss Weston, but a continuous state of mind. She had been so used to admiration from her earliest girlhood that it had become to her the very breath of life, and if one adorer was out of sight she must at once entrap another. Charlie Fisher was all very well for Yarmouth, but she had set her heart now upon a London beau, and here was Ralph Rhodes ready to her hand!

Whether she was destined to succeed in her aim did not at once appear; that Rhodes liked her society was evident, and though he laughed at her, he also laughed with her; he came frequently to Beryl Villa, and Richard encouraged him.

"Do you think it is wise to ask Mr. Rhodes here so often?" said Hylda, one day.

She was glad to have a subject on which they could converse in friendly fashion; for she was resolved that she would not let any estrangement creep into her manner towards her husband.

"Why not?" asked Richard.

"Florence seems to pay him great attentions," said Hylda.

"My dear child!" said Richard, in his superior tone, "if we had tried to keep all the people that Flo has paid attentions to out of her way, we should have had to shut her up in solitary confinement. There is safety in numbers, so far as she is concerned, and as for Rhodes, he is very well able to take care of himself."

"Well, you are the person to decide," said Hylda, "but I should think he is just the kind of man whom your father would thoroughly dislike."

"Yes, you are about right there. If you want to see an illustration of the Kilkenny cats, put my father and a red-hot Rad. into the same room. I always keep a decent veil over my opinions when I am down at Yarmouth. But, as I said before, you needn't be afraid; if you had known Miss Flo as long as I have you would see that her nonsense goes for nothing at all."

Hylde was silenced, but her conscience was not at ease nevertheless; she dared not say so to her husband, but in reality it was not Flo for whom she feared. While the younger sister paid her attentions, the elder sat in a corner and looked on, and Hylde had seen the expression in her eyes as she did so. How such a man as Ralph Rhodes could attract her she could not conceive; she had never done justice to the journalist's good qualities, and she looked upon Ellen as immeasurably his superior, and felt convinced that an attachment on her part could only produce a harvest of bitterness.

But, all the same, she was certain that such an attachment was not unlikely, and if she could have taken any means of transporting Mr. Rhodes for a season, she would certainly have done so. She felt sure that he cared nothing for Ellen; he talked to her on serious subjects, but it was as he might have talked to a brother politician; he admired her information, her accuracy, her powers of observation, but it was to the younger sister that he turned for recreation and enjoyment.

"Men do not marry for companionship," thought Hylde bitterly, as she watched the little drama.

She longed to be able to warn Ellen of the gulf that lay before her, but she did not know how to begin; it seemed an impertinence to imply that she cared for Mr. Rhodes, and yet on what other ground could she frame a warning?

The opportunity was put into her hands, however, in a way that she little expected.

Mr. Rhodes came to dinner one evening in, if possible, a more lively state of mind than usual. He attacked Flo with a stream of banter, and jokes and pleasantries grew fast and furious between the two. Ellen sat unnoticed while the talk went on, and when it was taken up again in

the drawing-room she slipped out of the French window which stood open to the still October night.

No one saw her except Hylda, and, with a sudden realisation of her fears, she followed and found her on the seat which stood under a tree on the miniature lawn; she turned her face away at the sound of footsteps, but she was not quick enough to hide the tears which filled her eyes.

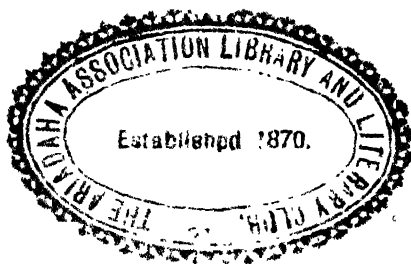
"Oh, Ellen, why did we ever have you here?" said Hylda, mournfully. "It has brought you nothing but sorrow."

Ellen did not answer for a moment; she was naturally so reserved that it was agony to her to have her feelings suspected, but to-night the depths of her heart had been stirred.

"I don't regret it for a moment," she said, the passion in her voice transforming it from its usual even quietness, "To love him is the happiest lot in the world."

Hylda was too startled to speak, she hardly knew her sister-in-law under such conditions as these, and the change alarmed her.

There was a silence, and then Ellen spoke again in a more ordinary tone. "It is quite hopeless, I know; no one ever looks at me when Flo is by, and it is not likely that they would. She has often thought that she cared for people, but she really cares for him. Who could help it? I would rather you had not found it out, but I know that I can trust you," and so saying she took Hylda's hand in hers and led her back to the drawing-room.



## CHAPTER XVI.

"How do you do, Mrs. Weston? We seem to be fated to meet in picture galleries!"

The speaker was Jock Chesterford, and as he came across one of the picture rooms in the South Kensington Museum and held out his hand to Hylda, he was shocked at the change in her appearance.

"I am afraid you are not feeling well," he said; "won't you come downstairs and have some tea?"

"Oh, no, thank you," said Hylda; "I am quite well, but we have been in London all the summer, and it is a little trying of course."

"I should think so!" said Jock. "I should soon die under such circumstances."

Hylda looked at his bronzed face with a smile. "You look fairly well at present," she said, a gleam of her natural fun returning to her.

"So I ought," said Jock. "I have had the most glorious time since I saw you last—fishing, shooting, swimming, and tramping, but I am going to get into harness now."

"What are you going to do?" asked Hylda.

"Well, an unexpected piece of good luck has fallen in my way. I have got enough to live upon, as you know, but I always meant to do something after I had taken my degree; I did not know exactly what, but while I was in Scotland I met Sir Tristram and he has offered me the post of private secretary. Isn't it grand?"

If Hylda could have heard that name without a pang she would have been delighted at his enthusiasm, but as it was she had some trouble to command her voice to reply

"Of course I know I am not fit for it," said Jock, detecting her constraint but putting it down to a wrong cause. "But I really do mean to work, Mrs. Weston, though I've been lazy enough in the past. I do care about things, though I know I seem as if I didn't, and I should like to feel that I had a hand in some of the work of the world. Besides, it must do anyone good to be with such a man as your cousin. I shall have two rooms in his London house, so I daresay I shall see you sometimes."

"When do you begin your work?" asked Hylda, returning no answer to this last remark.

"I have begun already, and I find plenty to do. It is strange that I should have met you here. I had to see one of the curators on business. Do you often come?"

"Not very often," said Hylda, "but when I do I always look at that picture," and she pointed to Vicat Cole's "Pool of London," which hung on the opposite wall.

"I can quite understand it," said Jock appreciatively; "but you are looking very tired still, I wish you would let me get you some tea."

"No, thank you; I am waiting here for some friends and am afraid of missing them. Ah! here they come," she added, as Mr. Rhodes, Ellen, and Flo entered the room.

The expedition had been a painful one to her all through but she felt now that the climax was reached. If she and Ellen could have gone alone to the Museum she would have enjoyed a quiet time there, but Flo's excitable presence spoiled everything. Hylda could not imagine what possessed her, for her tongue was not still a moment, but the mystery was explained when they reached their destination and found Mr. Rhodes in waiting at the entrance.

"I knew you meant to come!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "It's no use to try and take me in, I knew what you were up to all along. But now come and show me all there is to be seen; you can't talk about town drains to Ellen in a place like this!"

Hylda sighed impatiently as the loud-toned remarks fell on her ear; she knew that Flo had been annoyed on the previous evening by the persistence with which Mr. Rhodes



had talked to her sister of sanitary improvements, and had overheard her challenge to him to prove his repentance by escorting them to the Museum; but she had looked upon it in the light of a joke, and had taken no heed of it. She was vexed at his arrival, but it was impossible to send him away again, and she dragged along wearily at the heels of her party until she could literally go no further. She would have been thankful if Jock Chesterford had taken his departure before the trio returned; she knew his quizzing propensities, and shrank from the idea of having her sisters-in-law exposed to his ridicule, but he only bowed gravely in answer to her introduction, and she could not detect the slightest smile upon his face as he listened to a remark from Flo's ready tongue.

Such propriety was not to Flo's taste, however; greatly to her disgust, Mr. Rhodes had not responded with his usual alacrity to her advances, and had had the bad taste to interrupt several of her speeches with remarks addressed to her sister. She had lost her temper at last and was only partly mollified by his promise of sending her a copy of a novel of which they had been speaking; he stood in need of a lesson, decidedly, and as soon as she saw Jock Chesterford she felt that the opportunity lay ready to her hand. She sprang upon him, metaphorically speaking, as a tiger springs upon its prey, and before her sister-in-law had time to realise what she was doing she had plunged into the thick of a desperate flirtation.

Hylda turned pale with shame and despair, the better Jock behaved the worse she felt, for she knew that he must be filled with an inward loathing of the company in which he found himself. "The Pool of London" became a nightmare to her for the rest of her life, for the mere thought of it was enough to recall those fearful moments.

Sheer desperation nerved her at last to put an end to the scene. "We must not keep you, Mr. Chesterford," she said, and holding out her hand, she raised her eyes to his with a look that all her pride could not hinder from being one of appeal.

Jock met her glance with one of grave kindness, which was extinguished the next moment by a look of comic

discomfiture, for, following Hylda's example, Flo insisted upon seizing his hand and shaking it warmly !

An awkward silence fell upon the group after he had disappeared ; Hylda did not care to conceal her vexation, for she felt that Florence must be taught what proper behaviour was ; but Florence took no notice of Hylda, and seemed quite unconscious of her disapprobation. She had made up her mind that it would be delightful to return to Yarmouth as the betrothed of Mr. Rhodes ; whether she should marry him or not was a superfluous question, she had not at present got beyond the delicious triumph with which she should dash the hopes of her seaside admirers to the ground. The thought of Charlie Fisher's abject misery was irresistible ; she saw herself, in her mind's eye, flashing her ring conspicuously in his downcast face, rushing to the door at the postman's knock whenever he happened to spend the evening with them, and inventing many other exquisite torments at her leisure.

The prospect was too fascinating to be relinquished for any fear of future difficulties, and this being so, she resolved to stay at Beryl Villa until Ralph Rhodes' subjugation was complete. But great as she knew her influence with Richard to be, she knew also that it would not do to try her sister-in-law's endurance beyond a certain point, and therefore she managed to avoid an open dispute. Even Hylda could find no fault with her conduct during their return journey, and all through the evening she took care to say and do nothing which could offend.

Mr. Rhodes did not put in an appearance next day, much to Hylda's relief, for she was beginning to feel heartily sick of the affair, and to wish, for Ellen's sake, that he would keep away altogether ; but on the second day after their meeting at the Museum he arrived just as they had finished dinner, and was shown into the room where Richard sat alone over his wine.

Hylda and Ellen had gone out on to the lawn, and Flo listened impatiently for the dining-room door to open.

" I wonder why he didn't send me the book he promised me," she thought, " but I suppose he is jealous, poor fellow."

Well, I can understand it!" and she sighed sentimentally, as she looked at her reflection in the glass.

A footstep at the door made her start, and she turned away hastily, and sat down upon the sofa; it was as she hoped, Ralph Rhodes came in alone, shutting the door carefully behind him.

"Oh, you are alone?" he said, abruptly, as he glanced towards the open window.

Flo did not resent his abruptness; on the contrary, she was flattered by it, and she felt an unwonted excitement as she listened for his next words.

"I am sorry I did not send you that book yesterday," he said, drumming nervously on the mantelpiece, while he turned his back upon her and looked into the mirror.

"Oh, I quite understood," said Flo, blandly. "I know just how you felt."

"What on earth do you mean?" said Ralph, stopping his unmelodious tune in amazement.

"Why, I saw what you thought that day at the Museum. But how was I to prevent Mr. Chesterford from talking to me, I should like to know?"

She looked up at him with a coquettish glance that was quite lost upon him.

"It seemed to me that you talked to Mr. Chesterford a good deal more than he talked to you," he remarked; "but as to the book, I was merely going to say that I forgot all about it!"

Flo Weston had been snubbed before in the course of her life, but she had never yet felt snubbed. Mr. Rhodes had, however, succeeded in the latter feat, and she found it as disagreeable as it was novel.

He looked at her idly in the glass as he spoke, and saw that a hot tide of colour had rushed over her face, and that her eyes were angry and defiant.

"I'm in for it!" he said to himself, with a little shrug of the shoulders; "but it's her own fault for being such an idiot."

"I wonder how you've got the face to stand there like that!" she exclaimed, all her native vulgarity rushing to the surface. "Coming after me the way you've done, and

making everybody see what you meant. You're 'rather mistaken if you think you can treat me like that; I shall just go and see what Richard thinks of it."

Mr. Rhodes had lifted a china cup from the shelf while she was speaking, and examined the mark at the bottom with much apparent interest.

"I've been talking to Richard about it myself for the last half-hour," he said, coolly.

Flo looked at him with sudden curiosity. Had she been mistaken after all, and was this indifference the newest thing in love-making? At any rate, she would wait to hear a little more.

"And what did Richard say?" she asked.

"He told me that I had better come and try my chance. He could not say what his father's sentiments would be; but, at any rate, Ellen was old enough to judge for herself."

"Ellen!" exclaimed Flo, in involuntary dismay.

"Yes," said Ralph, putting the cup carefully down again. "Did you think I cared about you?"

He knew that it was a brutal thing to say, but if a girl chose to make a fool of herself, she must take the consequences.

Flo turned cold and sick with anger. "You did your best to make me think so," she flashed out.

"That is entirely your own idea," said Ralph, turning round with his back to the mantelpiece and his hands in his pockets, so that he could stare straight at her. "You flung yourself at my head. I'm not blaming you; lots of girls do it. They make their sex cheap, that's all."

"I shall not stay here to be insulted," said Flo, rising to her feet with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Very well," said Ralph, "I am going to look for Ellen."

"But you can't really care about *her*," said Flo, her jealousy overpowering her pride.

The thing was too absurd; no one could possibly prefer her sister's dull goodness to her own brilliant charms. Mr. Rhodes was only jesting with her; it was one of his

queer jokes, and in another moment he would be at her feet.

But her last remark added rage to Ralph's previous scorn, and he turned upon her with an unpleasant sneer curving his lip.

"Yes," he said, "I do care for her. Men chaff and carry on with forward rattlepates like you, but they give their hearts to women who can understand, and appreciate, and *love*."

He uttered the last word in a reverent tone, such as no human being had ever heard from his lips before, and turning upon his heel, walked down the steps into the garden.

The silence was only broken by Flo's gasps for breath; she felt his words still in the air, and shrank from them as though they had power to harm her physically.

"How dare he! how dare he!" she cried incoherently, as she buried her face among the sofa cushions; then springing to her feet she rushed across the room as though she would follow him and shatter him in pieces with her wrath.

The first breath of cool air upon her forehead was enough to stop her, however; to follow him would only be to expose herself to fresh humiliation, and dreading lest Hylda should come into the drawing-room, she fled upstairs and locked herself into her own room. If she had been scorned by Mr. Chesterford, she could have borne it, for his handsome face and distinguished appearance made him appear to her as one of the heroes of fiction, in whom her soul delighted; but to be trampled underfoot by a little sallow-faced journalist—a man who wore shabby clothes, and cast in his lot with tinkers and tailors—this was degradation indeed!

Various dramatic schemes floated through her mind as she sat alone in the darkness; some of the heroines she admired took poison, some starved themselves slowly to death, wringing tears from the eyes of every spectator and forgiving the monsters who had deserted them with smiles of angelic sweetness.

"I will begin to starve myself now, this very minute!"

she exclaimed desperately, and for fully a quarter of an hour she clung to her resolve in spite of the delicious smell of coffee that pervaded the house.

At the end of this time, however, she began to waver. If she faded away and died, Mr. Rhodes would triumph in the knowledge that he had been indispensable to her; the better plan would be to turn the tables upon him, and make him the laughing stock instead of herself.

The idea filled her with new energy, and getting up hastily she lighted the gas and began to hunt for her curling tongs; the first step to the desired end was to make an elaborate toilette, and with deft fingers she proceeded to arrange her hair and smarten up her dress. The excitement of the past hour had deepened the colour in her cheeks and lit up her eyes with new brilliancy, and when she descended to the drawing-room it was little wonder that all present started at the sight.

"So that's what you have been doing all this time," said Richard, "I wondered what you were after, but I must say that the result justifies it. She's worth looking at, eh, Rhodes?"

Mr. Rhodes made some muttered reply which was lost upon his listeners. He had confessed his cruelty to Ellen, and had assured her that the lesson would be so useful to her sister that it was not to be regretted; he had looked round with some compunction when they at last returned to the drawing-room, expecting to see a pale and wet-eyed object cowering in a corner, and it was sufficiently startling to be confronted by this dazzling creature all smiles and animation.

"But where are your congratulations?" pursued Richard, putting his friend's confusion down to an obvious cause. "Come, Flo, you don't mean to tell me that you can't interpret those shamefaced countenances."

Flo swept across the room in her rustling draperies and kissed Ellen condescendingly. "I am so glad for you, dear," she said, "it would be impossible to find two people better suited to one another."

She glanced from Ellen to her lover as she spoke, and an angry flush dyed Mr. Rhodes' sallow face.

Ellen's eyes were illuminated by the rapture of perfect satisfaction, and yet no one could have said that she looked beautiful. She had been crying for joy, and though tears sound very lovely in the pages of the poets, their effect upon the human face can hardly be said to be poetic. She could not gaze up admiringly at her lover because he was of exactly the same height as herself, and as Flo stood looking down upon them she seemed to tower majestically above them.

"Dear little people!" she said, laying a hand for a moment on a shoulder of each, then dismissing them royally as it were, she turned away and sank into a chair at her brother's side.

Richard laughed outright, and even Hylda could not forbear a smile; she had never thought that Flo possessed so much cleverness, and as she knew nothing of the recent dramatic scene she had no idea how her powers had been evoked.

"I was quite right about Flo, you see," said Richard, when they were alone. "I have known her too long to be excited by her pranks; she never cared a button for Rhodes."

Hylda did not feel quite so sure on this point, but she forebore to say so; if her suspicions were correct, and Florence had suffered a disappointment, it would be playing an unkind part to betray her, and thus the matter passed into one of the many subjects of silence that daily increased between her husband and herself.

Ralph Rhodes went back to his lodgings that night in not quite such a blissful state as he had expected. He did not swerve in the least in his allegiance to Ellen, nor did he repent of his harsh words to her sister, but yet he did not feel the exultation that should have belonged by right to a man who had just successfully snubbed one young lady and become engaged to another. He felt that he ought to be on a pinnacle of triumph, but, in spite of his best efforts, he could not perch himself there; he was despondent rather than glad, and the cause of his despondency was not far to seek; although he had administered a snubbing, he had been even more severely snubbed himself, and the man

remains to be born who can take a snubbing from a woman with complacency, though there are some who can take it with meekness. Instead of throwing himself into his easy chair, and indulging in a delicious reverie, he seized paper and pen, and set himself to the composition of a stinging article, which, when he read it over as the grey dawn began to break, he mentally designated as a "rattler."

Some maidens' jealousy would have been aroused by such a proceeding, but Ellen's faith remained unshaken when she heard of it; she had discovered in Ralph the other side of her soul, and outer accidents of word or deed had no power to disturb her.

It was well that she had such an anchor to hold by, for there were stormy days in store. Ralph's letter to her father produced an angry summons home; Richard would have gone with his sisters if he could possibly have left the office, but Ellen showed no desire for his presence; she had made up her mind what course to adopt, and she needed no assistance in carrying it out. She sat unmoved while her father expended his rage in shouts and vituperations and furious charges up and down the room, and when he had exhausted himself sufficiently to subside into a chair, she got up and stood in front of him.

"I shall not marry Mr. Rhodes in opposition to your wishes," she said, "so that it is false to call me undutiful; and I am thirty-one years old, so that it is false to call me a chit of a girl; but I shall never cease to love him, and shall consider myself engaged to him until he chooses to release me."

A further outburst was saved by the arrival of a caller on business, and Ellen withdrew to her room to write a description of the encounter to her lover. She was tearful and trembling now that it was over, and Flo felt a sincere pity for her when she went in to say good-night.

"I am not surprised that you feel it," she remarked, as she looked at her own radiant image in the glass, and wondered if in another six years she should be such a "dowdy" as Ellen. "Of course, it is your last chance, as one may say; for it's hardly to be supposed that you'll get another at your age."



Ellen made no reply ; such hopeless misunderstanding of her feelings was beyond all explanation, and she could only suffer in silence. But Flo could comprehend her silence as little as her words, and feeling that she had administered all the consolation in her power, she went off to bed with a vague idea forming itself in her mind.

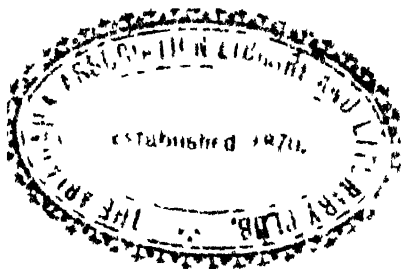
What better revenge could she take on Mr. Rhodes than to intercede with her father on his behalf ? She flattered herself that it would be a noble deed, worthy of the angel-eyed heroines of romance, and far more uncommon than any daggers or poison could be. She knew that Ellen had a shrewd suspicion of what had, really passed, though she had no idea that Ralph had told her the whole story, and she felt a strong desire to put her in the wrong. She could say things to her father that no other member of the family could have ventured upon, and she made up her mind to attack him at the earliest opportunity.

Before she could carry out her purpose, however, a letter from Mr. Rhodes had paved the way for her mediation. On receipt of Ellen's news, he wrote at once to her father, in a strain of haughty defiance, informing him that he scorned and despised him, and that his action could not have been more hateful if he had been the descendant of a hundred earls.

The latter phrase seemed to him to convey the deadliest insult, and he looked at it complacently after he had written it. But what is one man's poison is another man's meat, and, in reality, he could not have employed a more adroit piece of flattery. Mr. Weston tossed the letter away with an assumption of contempt, calling the writer a "scurrilous villain" and a "twopenny-halfpenny scribbler"; but to those who were skilled enough to decipher his mental barometer, it was evident that the storm was dispersing, and that more genial weather might be expected. Flo found her task a far more easy one than she had expected, therefore. A few abusive remarks were flung at her head, but, when they were over, he sent for Ellen, and informed her that he supposed she had better tell her "newspaper fellow" to come down at the end of the week ; and Ellen, who had long ago learned to be thankful for small mercies,

kissed him fervently, and went off to write a rapturous letter to her lover.

She was in too happy a mood to be critical of anyone's motives, and Flo's generous conduct was duly expatiated upon. Ralph smiled a queer smile as he perused the letter; but he felt that it was a case in which a policy of silence was best for all parties, so, pocketing his pride, he went down to Yarmouth to receive his happiness at the hands of his future sister-in-law.



## CHAPTER XVII.

THE 17th of October was a date graven upon Hylda's heart in living letters. In the days of their engagement she and Richard had devised many sweet and fanciful observances by which they would celebrate the anniversary of their first meeting, and in spite of the cold shadow that had crept over her life, she could not even now think of it without a thrill. Might it not be possible that a return of the well-remembered season would wake softer thoughts in her husband's mind and turn the autumn of the year to spring?

It was a faint hope, but she clung to it and would not let it go, and as the day drew nearer she resolved to ask him once more to go down to the Manor with her, for she felt that if he were surrounded with the same scenes there would be more chance of old associations rising to life again. She watched her opportunity, and finding that he was gratified by the news of his father's consent to Ellen's engagement, she took advantage of his good humour to propound her scheme.

"I don't see much object in it," he said, when she had finished speaking.

Hylda felt chilled, but she would not give up at once.

"You used to say that we would always spend that evening in my old study," she said, "so that we might feel again as we felt when I had been longing to see you, and you came to me through the flood."

Her voice trembled a little as she spoke, and Richard was not quite untouched by the memories that she recalled.

"One says lots of things at a time like that which one

doesn't mean," he remarked, "but still I don't mind if you are very keen about it. Besides, I suppose we must see your mother some time or other, and it is a lesser evil to go there than to have her up here."

It was not a gracious acceptance, but such as it was Hylda felt glad of it, and she made haste to write to her mother before he should have changed his mind.

Mrs. Carlyle was only too thankful to get the letter. A stronger-minded woman would have resented their long neglect, and a woman of deeper feeling would have felt too much pain at the thought of it to be able to look forward to the visit with any pleasure; but Hylda's mother thought less of the separation from her child than of the awkwardness which that separation entailed, and she was so relieved to be able to announce her coming that she had room for no other thought.

Hylda's engagement and marriage had been a topic of interest in Stowbury for more than the proverbial nine days, but time had done much to wear it out, and had it not been for the fact of her lengthened absence, it would by this time have been pretty well forgotten. But when month after month passed by and nothing was seen of the bride and bridegroom, a delightful field of speculation was opened up, and the gossips of the neighbourhood were not slow in taking advantage of it. Many and various were the causes suggested, and Mrs. Carlyle had much to undergo in the shape of innuendo and condolence.

If Lady Carlyle had been in her sister-in-law's place no one would have dared to question her on the subject, but Mrs. Carlyle was open to general attack, and if she had had courage for such an enterprise she would have left Stowbury altogether. But relief had come at last, and her only regret arose from the fact that though Tristram was away from the Court, his mother was at home. Yet even her dread of Harriet's galling criticisms could not rob her of her sense of triumph.

Hylda said nothing of the probable length of their visit in writing her first letter. She had asked her husband how long he could stay, and had received no answer.

"Do you think you could spare a week?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Richard impatiently, "I'll spare six if you'll let me finish my writing in peace!"

This was clearly an exaggeration, but after such a speech Hylda felt justified in telling her mother that they hoped to be able to stay a week or two, and Mrs. Carlyle set off to the Court at once, armed with this fortifying news.

"It is so thoughtful and considerate of them to have waited until they could really take a good holiday," she said; "if they had just run down for a Sunday, it would only have made me miss Hylda more afterwards; but now I shall have them for quite a nice long visit, and we shall have time to talk to our hearts' content."

The argument was a specious one, and Mrs. Carlyle was quite convinced by her own eloquence as she spoke, nor did she interpret her sister-in-law's silence as dissent; but in truth it was rather surprise than disagreement that kept Harriet from replying. Whatever Cecilia might say, she was certain that Hylda was unhappy, and she was amazed that she should risk a visit of several weeks' duration under her mother's roof. An unwonted sense of compassion prevented her from speaking her mind, however, and for once she allowed her victim to go unscathed.

The news of Hylda's approaching arrival was duly trumpeted throughout Stowbury, and every time that Mrs. Carlyle made the announcement, she took care to add the fact that their stay was to be a long one.

"Mr. Weston is so very much occupied," was her formula, "that he really never has a minute to call his own; and they are so devoted to one another that they cannot bear to be separated. As soon as he could possibly get away for a long visit they wrote off at once, and they will stay as long as ever they can."

The explanation sounded well, and as no one liked to suggest that there was nothing in all this which need have prevented Mrs. Carlyle from going to stay with them, her satisfaction was unmarred.

"I shall certainly ask Mr. Weston to be good enough to come and speak to the girls," said Miss Elton, when the news of the expected arrival reached her ears. "I am

sure he will be glad to do so, because he met Miss Carlyle here, you remember."

She beamed at the governesses across the supper table, and though their enthusiasm was scarcely equal to hers, they were not indifferent to the thought of seeing Mr. Weston again. He was no longer a knight of romance, but still it would be distinctly interesting to meet a voyager from that sea of matrimonial bliss of which they had read innumerable descriptions, and of which they had even dared to dream.

The 17th of October fell on a Tuesday, and Hylda had proposed that she and Richard should come down on the preceding Saturday. It was late when they arrived, and she could barely see the outlines of the house as they drove up in the gathering twilight. Her heart was beating fast now that the actual moment of meeting had come, but, as the damp sweetness of the autumn garden was wafted across to her, and familiar sights and sounds pressed upon her on every side, the past year seemed to drop away from her like a vision, and she was a child once more.

Her cry of pleasure, as she sprang forward to meet her mother, ended in a sob, and there were tears in her eyes that she could not hide. Mrs. Carlyle thought it only natural that she should be moved by her return to her old home; she felt a good deal stirred herself, and kissed her daughter again and again, while she held out a welcoming hand to Richard.

Richard took the hand calmly enough, and stood looking on at the scene with a superior smile. He was always amused by what he called "femininities," except when they happened to interfere with him, in which case he swept them aside with a ruthless hand.

"We might stand for a *tableau* of the Return of the Prodigal," he remarked.

Hylda drew herself quickly away from her mother's arms, and the lines of care on her face re-appeared as if by magic, for there was sufficient truth in the words to give them a sting. She knew well enough now that she had demanded her share of this world's goods with reckless impatience, and the bitter suspicion had begun to dawn upon her that

she had utterly wasted her substance ; but she knew that Richard had no such thought in his mind, and that his tasteless remark was simply born of the lip.

"I had better go upstairs at once," she said ; " we must not keep dinner waiting."

"It is quite delightful to have you here at last," said Mrs. Carlyle, as they went upstairs hand in hand. "But of course I know that you could not come before. Don't think that I am blaming you, dear ! I have told everybody how considerate I think it is of you to have waited until you could pay a good long visit."

She paused for no reply, but prattled on of a hundred things as she watched her daughter's preparations for dinner. Hylda felt a strange sinking of the heart as she listened to her ; nothing had been further from her intentions than to make a confidante of her mother, and yet she had had a secret hope that she should find the strength and comfort in her counsel that had been lacking in the past. But as soon as she came face to face with her again, heard her voice, and caught the tone of her conversation, she knew that any such hope was vain ; nothing was more unlikely than that her mother should guess at anything that lay beneath the surface, and even if it was plainly put before her, it was evident that she would take good care to ignore it. To keep up appearances before the world was not enough for Mrs. Carlyle's satisfaction, she must deceive herself as well as her neighbours before she could be thoroughly comfortable.

The evening passed off better than might have been expected ; Richard was not insensible to the pleasures of the table nor to the impression produced by his surroundings. The fine old house and the handsome furniture might be treated as objects of scorn when they were out of sight, but it was undeniable that they possessed a certain influence over him when he was brought into contact with them. Hylda watched him anxiously at first, but as dinner went on, she acknowledged with surprise and relief that he was more like what he had been before their marriage than she had ever yet seen him. "More like himself," she would have phrased it ; but those

who knew Richard Weston best could have told her that he was less like himself to-night than he had been at any time since their wedding day.

"I did not ask anyone to meet you this evening," said Mrs. Carlyle, "for I thought that we would have one evening to ourselves. There are plenty of people longing to see you, and several invitations have come for you already, but I have not asked anyone yet except your aunt and Mr. and Mrs. Chesterford, who will dine with us on Monday."

Hylde looked at her husband in some alarm; she had never dared to reveal to him that she had held out a hope of a lengthened stay, and she dreaded an outburst of anger. He said nothing, however, bad or good, and when he followed the ladies into the drawing-room, he took up a book which he had brought with him for review, and left the mother and daughter to their conversation.

"Here is a note for you, Richard," said Hylde, going into the library next morning when the church bells were ringing. "It came yesterday, but it was only given to me just now."

Richard had just struck a match, and he waited to get his cigar well alight before he took the note from her hands.

"Are you not coming to church?" she asked, with some dismay.

"Not I," returned Richard, carelessly; "I have something else to do."

He took up a manuscript that lay on his knee, as though expecting to be left in peace, but Hylde did not move.

"It will make a very bad impression if I appear without you," she said.

"Stay away, then," said Richard, watching a ring of smoke curl up into the air.

"You know that I cannot do that. I think you might have a little more consideration."

Richard lifted his eyebrows at her tone, but he was not angry yet. "It would make a much worse impression if I yawned all through the prayers and slept all through the sermon," he said; "therefore, I am only consulting your interests when I stay away."



"But there is no necessity for you to yawn, or to go to sleep either," persisted Hylda; "do come, Richard; it would make me so happy."

"I am afraid you must be unhappy, then," said Richard, taking up the note and opening it. "Leave me alone, now, there's a good girl, and perhaps I'll go out with you this afternoon."

Hylda's heart swelled, and she felt helplessly miserable, but even so she would not show resentment, and she laid her hand on his shoulder while he read his note.

"What a nice letter!" she said, forgetting her troubles for a moment, "I always did like Miss Elton. You will go and give her girls a lecture, won't you?"

"Not if I know it! I have done with pattering platitudes to schoolgirls, thank goodness, and I am not going to be caught like that. It is great cheek of her to allude to our meeting there, especially as anyone can see with half an eye that she only wants to secure a lecture as an advertisement for her school. She is rather mistaken, I can tell her, if she thinks I shall make myself cheap in that style!"

Hylda looked at him indignantly, but she did not dare to remonstrate. "Will you let me answer the note?" was all she said.

"Oh, yes," said Richard, tossing it over to her with a laugh, "you are afraid I shall wound her little feelings, are you? I am much too wary to make blunders of that sort; but, still, if you like to do my lying for me, you are quite welcome to the job."

"It is such a comfort to me, dear, to see you looking so well and bright," said Mrs. Carlyle, when a few minutes later they set out for the church. "Your aunt said you were pale when she saw you, but I told her that it was nothing but London heat."

Hylda had conquered the impulse to throw herself upon her bed and cry when she left her husband; her eyes were shining with a strange lustre, and there was a vivid spot of colour on each cheek; she had even found time to run upstairs and put on the white bonnet which she had at first discarded as too smart, and the congregation gazed at her admiringly as she walked up the aisle.

All through the prayers she managed to keep her thoughts at bay, but when the sermon began not even the familiar tones of the old Rector's voice could silence them any longer.

She had told herself many a time that she ought to hold her own with Richard, and that it lay in her power to make him what she wished him to be ; she had told herself so, but she had never found courage to make the attempt until her return to her old home had lifted for a moment the weights that held her down, and the only result had been that she was more despairing than before.

She felt utterly cast down and weary, and the knowledge that she must hide her woes behind a smile seemed to add the last straw to her burden ; but the smile was ready as soon as the service was over, and her greetings to her old friends left nothing to be desired.

Richard had apparently forgotten his promise of taking her out in the afternoon, for she found a note when she returned saying that he had gone for a long tramp but should be back by dinner time.

She glanced apprehensively at her mother as she told her, but Mrs. Carlyle was not so enamoured of her son-in-law's society as to feel his absence otherwise than as a relief ; his nominal presence was all that she wanted, and she was only too glad to have Hylda to herself.

Richard came back improved in temper by his solitary exercise, he may even have been a little ashamed of himself, for he took pains to be civil to Hylda as well as to Mrs. Carlyle, and when conversation seemed to flag he offered to read aloud to them.

" If only he would be like this always," thought Hylda, as she watched his dark head against the light and wondered if it had been only obstinacy and self-assertion that she had idealised into strength and power. But such thoughts were fatal to peace of mind, and she banished them with the hope that nothing would happen to bring back her husband's black mood.

Such a hope, however, was too bright for fulfilment ; Mrs. Carlyle announced at breakfast next morning that Mrs. Chesterford had written to say that her husband's

brother was with them and that he would very much like to accompany them in the evening, and Hylda saw in a moment by the cloud on Richard's brow that the prospect did not please him.

"It was so fortunate," said Mrs. Carlyle cheerfully, as she dispensed the tea, "Jennings was going to Stowbury on an errand, so I wrote a little note and sent it at once. Mr. Craven will be here, but still we should have been a gentleman short, and though it would not have mattered for an informal party, still it is pleasanter to have the right number."

"Is Mrs. Jennings any better than she used to be?" asked Hylda, hoping to change the subject.

"Oh, yes, my dear. I got her some medicine from an advertisement that has done her a great deal of good. Mr. Chesterford gave me such a scolding when he found it out, and Jock told his brother that he was committing an act of schism in reproving one of Mr. Craven's parishioners. You know his amusing way. He is so much improved since he has been working with Tristram; I am glad you will see him this evening, he and Richard will be sure to find plenty to say to one another—he is not a dull dweller in the country as I am!"

She looked at her son-in-law with a conscious smile as she spoke; it was an unmistakeable opening for a compliment, and in spite of her age, Mrs. Carlyle had not at all lost her love of flattery. But Richard did not seem inclined to take the opening, he sat tapping his fork on the table, while his brow grew darker and his lips more compressed, and Mrs. Carlyle looked at him in surprise.

"You are thinking about your letters I expect, Richard," said Hylda, feeling that she must do something to improve the situation; "do you want to catch the early post?"

"No," said Richard, looking up with a scowl, but remembering luckily that he was not at home, he forced his muscles into a smile. "I have a good deal of writing to do notwithstanding," he added, "so, if you will excuse me, I will go at once."

"It is quite delightful to see dear Richard so devoted to

his work!" murmured Mrs. Carlyle, as the door closed behind him.

Hylda made no reply; she found her mother's determined optimism trying in the extreme, but pride kept her silent. She had thought that she should have to exercise the greatest care in warding off dangerous topics, and with the inconsistency of human nature she was almost disappointed that there was no need for her precautions. Mrs. Carlyle insisted on taking a rose-coloured view of everything, and now and again a chilling suspicion crept into Hylda's heart that she did it purposely, and not because she was blind to the fact that clouds hung over her daughter's sky. It was no doubt the prudent course to pursue, but she wondered sometimes where she could turn for aid if the storm should burst upon her.

No one who saw Hylda enter the drawing-room that evening would have guessed at any secret sorrow in her life. Richard had often told her that if she were always bright and happy, he should always be in a pleasant humour; the retort was an obvious one, but to tell Richard that if he were always in a pleasant humour she should always be bright and happy, would only have provoked some of the scornful remarks that she had learnt to dread. He looked at her with more softness than he had done for a long time, when she stood before him ready to descend.

"If you always looked like *that*," he said meaningly, and though the speech carried a sting, it was so long since he had spoken any word of admiration that it brought the colour into her cheeks.

It had taken Mr. Chesterford a long time to forgive Hylda, but, as he had no right to take up the cudgels on his friend's behalf against that friend's distinct command, he was ready to meet her in a conciliatory spirit. Hylda was on her mettle, she talked her best, and entered into every subject with such ease and vivacity that the Vicar was fairly astonished.

"I don't think I ever saw anyone improved so much as Mrs. Weston," he exclaimed, enthusiastically, as they drove home that evening.

Jock could not forbear a whistle of amazement.

"I know you never thought she needed improvement," said his brother good-humouredly, "but to my mind the change is extraordinary. Her husband must have more in him than I ever imagined, for her crudities seem to have vanished away!"

"On that principle you might advocate marriage with a grindstone," remarked Jock, "there would be nothing like it for wearing one down to a uniform polish."

But, clearsighted as the Vicar thought himself, it was not with him that Lady Carlyle would have agreed that night; as a rule she differed from Jock on principle, and yet as she drove homewards and thought of her sister-in-law's complacent expression, she uttered the oracular words, "I wonder whether we shall live to be glad or sorry that Cecilia was born without sense!"



## CHAPTER XVIII.

On the morning of the fateful 17th of October Hylda woke early, and as soon as she was dressed she crossed the gallery and opened the door of her old study. With a touch of superstition she had kept away from the room since her arrival, and she glanced around her with an expectant gaze when she entered, as if the ghosts of her past and the visions of her future were waiting to greet her.

The blinds were down, and only a faint gleam of light stole in through the windows, but as she raised them she saw that it was a true October day; heavy clouds floated over the sky, great gusts of wind hurled themselves against the trees, while in the distance the river rushed stormily down through the sodden meadows. It was just what she had longed to see; for her own sake as well as her husband's she wished the old associations to be revived, and as she stood by the window she let her mind dwell once more on her first introduction to the hero of her dreams.

A step in the gallery outside broke in upon her thoughts. She raised her head joyfully and hurried to the door; Richard had not forgotten his tryst!

"Come and look!" she said, taking his hand to lead him across the room. "It is so like what it was a year ago!"

"I hope to goodness it isn't," said Richard, "or I shall never get to the station."

"To the station?" said Hylda, loosing his hand suddenly.

"Yes, I've been looking for you to put my things together. I got up early and have had breakfast already."

"But where are you going?"

"Back to town, of course. You didn't think I was going to stay more than two days in this deadly hole, did you?"

"But Richard, mamma thinks we have come for a long visit."

"Indeed! 'Mamma' must be undeceived, that's all. Make haste, there's no time to lose."

The colour had all ebbed away from Hylda's face, and she was looking at him with a dismayed expression that roused his wrath.

"I never knew anyone like you for making scenes," he said, impatiently. "What the use of it is I can't see; but I suppose you do. I wish you would give me a little peace, for a change."

"I wish you would give *me* a little peace," cried Hylda, passionately. "I never seem to please you now in anything, and yet—a year ago—"

"Oh! do stop that 'year ago' business!" said Richard, turning angrily towards the door. "It is absolutely senseless; if you would get rid of all your stupid sentiment, there might be some chance of your being some good."

Hylda said nothing. She might have learned by experience that in any conflict with her husband she was sure to be worsted; put a refined and sensitive nature into collision with a harsh and obstinate one, and only one result is possible.

"Well, are you going to help me, or must I pack for myself?" said Richard, after a moment's pause.

"I will help you," said Hylda, in a low voice, moving towards the door as she spoke.

"It is really quite unnecessary to make such a fuss," he went on, recovering his temper as he generally did as soon as he got his own way. "I shall probably run down again next Saturday. It is not to be expected that I should stay down here. You can stay as long as you like, of course; you say that you want me to leave you in peace."

Hylda did her packing silently; after his abuse of her

sentimentality, she could not tell him that the real cause of her dismay was his forgetfulness of the tryst they were to have kept; nothing should induce her to mention it now, and she said nothing until her task was finished.

"I had better go and see if mamma is dressed," she said, when all was ready.

"What for?"

"You ought to say good-bye to her."

"I shall miss the train if I do. You've made me late already with your nonsense."

"But it is very unusual to go off in such an uncere-  
monious way," said Hylda, who dreaded the comments of  
her relations almost as much as she dreaded her husband's  
anger.

"You need not be always dinning your good breeding  
into my ears," said Richard, as he rang the bell for the  
portmanteau to be carried downstairs. "I know how to  
behave, thank you. Come, say good-bye, there's a good  
girl."

He gave her a kiss, and, taking up his rug, hurried off  
without waiting for a reply.

Hylda listened to his footsteps as they died away; she  
would not let herself cry, for she knew that in a few  
minutes she must meet her mother at the breakfast-table,  
and she could not hope to explain Richard's departure  
calmly if she gave way to her tears now.

Mrs. Carlyle accepted her excuses without asking any  
questions; she took her daughter for a walk in the morn-  
ing and for a drive in the afternoon, and all through the  
day her cheerful chit-chat fell upon Hylda's worn nerves  
like the continual dropping of a rainy day. She was  
thankful when bed-time came, but she could not sleep, and  
as soon as the house was still, she wrapped herself in her  
dressing-gown, and went to keep the solitary watch in her  
old chamber.

No one seemed to have made any use of the room since  
she had left it, and she shivered a little as she set her lamp  
down upon the writing-table; the air felt as chilly as that  
of a vault, and the mournful fancy crossed her mind that  
the watch she came to keep was a watch beside the dead.



How many hopes and ideas had been born in that room, frail innocents that had been slaughtered by the keen blade of experience !

She looked sadly at the books that she had left upon the shelves, and wondered whether they felt more lonely and neglected than those she had taken with her, and which spent their days in a certain box at Beryl Villa. But the books could only gaze back at her speechlessly, and, sitting down at the table, she opened one of the drawers, and turned over some of the papers that lay within it. The first thing that met her eye was the syllabus of the lectures that had made such an era in her life ; her hand trembled as she touched it, but forcing herself to the effort, she took it out and laid it before her on the table.

"The Evolution of Revolt. The Germ of Freedom. Desire passing into Thought and Thought into Expression." How well she remembered the phrases ! Sentence after sentence of Richard's lectures came back to her mind as she sat there, and she could almost hear his resonant voice declaiming the high-sounding periods. What a trumpet-peal his eloquence had been to her then ! How was it that now it seemed no more than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal ?

She tried to think the matter out dispassionately, as though it were another's interest and not her own. Was it that her access to her husband's papers had shown her that most of his utterances were no more than a clever stringing together of other men's ideas ? Not altogether ; it is not given to everyone to be original, and to assimilate the thoughts of others is no crime if they be repeated with sincerity. But here came the haunting dread ; was Richard sincere in his opinions ? She had no doubt that Ralph Rhodes was absolutely sincere, even when he said that every aristocrat and plutocrat ought to be ground to powder and made into bread for the starving populace ; he was mistaken and extravagant of course, but he would have proved his words cheerfully at the stake. But when Richard poured out the foaming torrents of his wrath against tyrants, and urged upon his audience the sublime duty as well as the privilege of Freedom, it was no more than

"claptrap," as he would himself have confessed—all in the day's work, and paid for at so much the hour!

With what a sneer would he silence her now, if she were to show him the essay that she took from the drawer and turned over with a pang of remembrance.

"Every human soul has a right to its own development. Domestic tyranny is as foul a crime as national tyranny, but it will continue to be perpetrated so long as its victims are weak enough to submit."

Her pen had flown along the lines with lightning speed, while her cheek flushed and her eye kindled at the recollection of the spirit-stirring utterances that had awakened her response.

She turned to the last page and looked at the blue pencil scrawl that had once been so precious to her—"An exceedingly striking and well-written essay." How her heart had glowed as she read it, and now she felt as if her heart was nothing but a heap of grey ashes, in which not one smouldering spark remained. She pushed the papers suddenly away with a feeling of sick hopelessness; what was Freedom after all—she had snatched at it with eager hand, and had discovered that it was only Bondage in disguise!

Little as she knew it, the very same matter was being discussed at the same moment in Richard's study at Beryl Villa. He had telegraphed to his future brother-in-law that he was returning to town, and the same hour that witnessed Hylda's bitter vigil saw the two men conversing amid clouds of smoke.

"There is no doubt about it," Richard was saying, "Young Chesterford gave Lord Penninghurst himself as his authority; he had seen a letter of his to Carlyle."

"But everyone I have seen says that the General Election will not come for another eight months."

"Very likely; but the Government have got their plan up their sleeve. They intend to go to the country as soon after Christmas as they can manage it, and the secret will be in everyone's mouth directly."

"What a blabbing young fool Chesterford must be!" remarked Rhodes.

"All young fellows of that type are. It only needs a judicious use of the pump-handle. Of course, he saw that he had made a blunder, and tried to get out of it again; but that is nothing to us; here is your chance for you, and you had better go down to Bennington and undermine Carlyle's influence."

"I don't quite understand why you are so keen against Carlyle," said Rhodes.

Richard hailed the indication of Rhodes' reluctance with satisfaction.

"You ought not to be surprised that I uphold the good cause," he said, evasively.

"Only that I never can quite make out whether it is the good cause to you. You never seem to me to be more than half-hearted at the best."

"Double-faced would describe me better," said Richard, speaking with the curious frankness that characterised him at times. "The chief's politics have to be mine."

"I never concealed my opinions when I was 'sub,'" said Rhodes.

Most men would have been offended by the implied reproach, but Richard shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Exactly," he said, "and you see the result; your shoes are left empty for me to step into! I agree fully with Bacon, that a man may be one thing in his official capacity and another in his private life. That is the kind of utterance that comes from my official mouth," and he pushed the current copy of a well-known Conservative journal across to his friend.

"'Radical Retrogression.' Is that it?" asked Rhodes, in a satirical tone.

Richard nodded; and Rhodes opened a page at random, and began to read:

"The progressionists of the present day are but retrogressionists in disguise. They talk of 'levelling up' the masses, which will merely result in a 'levelling down' of the classes, and a consequent decline of civilisation. They talk of Democracy, and say that Parliament is bound to carry out the will of the people, the end of which will be that ministers will be executed by the mob, as they once

were by the king, if they fail to carry out its demands. They talk of freedom, which, in their mouths, is merely a catchword implying that every man whose income is above a certain rate is bound to provide for those whose income is below it. Free education, free medicine, free music, free art—free everything, in fact, for the working man, so that all those who are not under the protection of an Eight Hours Bill must toil twenty hours out of every twenty-four to satisfy the ravenous monster.”

“It sound rather well when you read it!” said Richard complacently.

“Does it?” said Rhodes, “I’ll read you some more then.”

He turned over a page or two and began nearer the end. “New methods? What are these new methods of which we hear so much just now from Radical platforms. Is it a new truth that the voice of the people is the voice of God? The worship of Democracy is a sign of the time, but it is not exclusively a sign of the present time. Whatever its priests may declare, moreover, it is not a worship that has come to stay. It will be succeeded by others; it will be superseded, forgotten, buried, until in the whirligig of time it comes to the top once more, and a future generation will be told as we are told to-day that the problem of Society has been solved at last! How can we predict this so confidently? Because King Demos is, after all, only a man of straw. If he were, indeed, possessed of vitalising force, he would be a more powerful monarch than the world has yet seen; beside his army, Napoleon’s would appear as a handful; beside his victories, Alexander’s would fade into nothing. But the explosive power has been put into his hand, and, like a schoolboy’s Guy Faux, he cannot use it; the electorate has been extended, but interest in political matters has not grown with it; except at election times the present vast mass of voters cares for none of these things; like the priests of Baal the prophets of King Demos cry and cut themselves in their frenzy, but he hears not nor answers!”

“That’s rather ‘tall,’ perhaps,” said Richard, “but on the whole I consider that there’s great merit in that article.”

"Do you?" said Rhodes scornfully. "Well, I can give you my opinion of it in a nutshell: it is worthy of the methods and morals of your party!"

"Don't talk about my party," said Richard, "I have no party."

"That is just what I say!" blazed out the other, rising from his chair and casting away the obnoxious magazine. "You have no political principles, you are absolutely without political morality, and yet you put yourself forth as a political teacher! You are a blind guide, a whited sepulchre, a hypocrite—yea, and more than a hypocrite."

"Come, come, my dear sir," interrupted Richard, "this wilful waste will lead to woeful want! These epithets will be useful to you by-and-by on the platform, so you had better husband them with care. As to the rest, you will find it far more profitable to talk of your future prospects than of my past iniquities."

Rhodes fumed indignantly, but from Ellen's brother he could bear a good deal, and his wrath evaporated finally in a smile. "I am very glad I read your article all the same," he said, subsiding into his chair again; "it has given me some good ideas. I shall take up Freedom as my election cry; equality of opportunity is the equality I demand; whatever life may deny, all men should have an equal chance to take or to leave."

"A very good theory," said Richard, "but allow me to point out to you that to go down to an agricultural constituency with such a cry as 'equality of opportunity,' is a folly of which no one but such a genius as you would be capable. What meaning will it convey to the Bennington labourers? You had much better go in for a Free Clothing Bill for the working classes while you are about it."

"The very thing!" cried Rhodes. "Why should the rich man wear silk and velvet while the poor man goes in rags? Generations of luxury have to be expiated, and how can they be expiated better than by providing for those who toil and spin that their masters may be clothed like the lilies of the field?"

"Excellent!" said Richard, drily. "I only hope you won't be asked where the money is to come from. as the

man was who advocated the payment of members while he refused on economical grounds to vote for Free Education."

"Let them ask," returned the other, "I have my answer ready. Did you hear that Carlyle had £50,000 left him lately? A man rolling in riches already! It's the way of the world all over, but still it is a lucky chance for me. If anyone asks me where the money is to come from, I shall say that their member could give a new suit of clothes to every voter in the constituency without feeling it."

"You have worked yourself up to white heat over it already," said Richard, regarding him with a cynical smile. "Fancy being able to get up such an enthusiasm over a scheme that you know perfectly well will never become law!"

"I don't know that at all," retorted Rhodes. "Besides, my enthusiasm is not expended on any particular measure; it is the enthusiasm of humanity."

"The enthusiasm of pauperism would be a better name for it, it seems to me!" said Richard. "You do not seem to realise that your socialistic scheme is really a giant league for the manufacture of paupers. England will become one great open-air poorhouse if you are allowed your course unchecked."

"My course has been checked long enough," said Rhodes, changing his tone suddenly. "If I don't get in this time I can't say whether I shall ever get another chance; I have had a hint from headquarters that I shall have to find the sinews of war for myself if I fail again. I wish that Carlyle had not got such a hold upon the constituency; I shall have my work cut out for me!"

Richard sat long in thought that night after his friend had gone, and as the result of his meditations he wrote a line to his wife telling her that he should come down to Stowbury on Saturday, and that he wished her to return to town with him on the following Monday. He was revolving a plan in his mind for the accomplishment of which a confidential talk with Jock Chesterford was a necessity, and he was quite aware that there was no chance of getting

him to the house unless he had some better inducement than his own company to offer. It was a difficult game that he had to play, but he was determined to play it, come what might. Flo's careless words had dropped into prepared soil, and were already bringing forth fruit; he hated Tristram from the bottom of his soul, and he was resolved to revenge himself upon him.

Hylda hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry when she received her husband's summons. She was reluctant to leave her mother, but the strain of keeping up appearances with her numerous visitors was almost more than she could bear; and, moreover, the fact that Richard wanted her had something very consoling about it. If his love for her had been utterly dead, he would have been relieved by her absence.

She looked more cheerful than she had done all through her visit when she bade her mother good-bye.

"I shall soon be coming again," she said brightly, "and I hope that you will come and see us before long; it is dreadful to think that you have never seen our dear little home!"

"It is like a romance in real life to see how fond those two are of one another!" said Mrs. Carlyle when she next saw her sister-in-law.

"I hate romances in real life," said Lady Carlyle, and Cecilia sighed gently and said no more.

Hylda's hopes of a better understanding between her husband and herself were somewhat dashed by his manner after their return. If it was true that he could not get on without her, he certainly had a strange way of showing it, for she had never known him stop out so often or so late as he did in the few days following her arrival. She knew nothing of his invitation to Jock, nor yet of Jock's refusal. The young man knew that he had been guilty of a blunder, and he was resolved not to fall into another; Richard's invitation to him, therefore, to come and dine and have a chat over Stowbury affairs with Mrs. Weston, met with a politely worded but firm reply in the negative.

The refusal threw an unexpected obstacle in Richard's way, but, annoyed as he was, he vowed that it should make

no difference to his purpose; there were plenty of other means to be resorted to, and though it was necessary to keep Ralph Rhodes in ignorance of his plans, his friend's departure for Bennington left the coast clear.

Each evening that Hylda passed in solitude was spent by her husband at a club which he had lately joined, a club which went by the well-sounding name of the Arts and Crafts. The arts and crafts represented by its members were not, however, precisely what the name seemed to imply: the artful and crafty souls who held their meetings within its walls had hatched more dark plots and torn more fair reputations to pieces than any other body of men in London. The numbers were very small, and as each member who joined was bound over to secrecy, they had no fears for their safety. Only the initiated knew of the real aim and object of the club; to the outside world it seemed respectability itself, and no one who passed by its humble portals would have suspected that it was nothing more nor less than a birthplace for scandal.

It was past twelve o'clock one night, and Hylda as usual was sitting alone in the drawing-room waiting for her husband's return. The servants had gone to bed long ago, and all was quiet; Bective Avenue at night was almost as silent as Stowbury itself, and there was no sound to break the stillness. She started up once or twice, thinking that she heard the creak of the opening gate, then sank back again disappointed, till at last she dropped off into a troubled sleep, and heard nothing until a knock at the door aroused her.

"Did you forget your latch-key, Richard?" she asked, as she opened it.

There was no answer, and she started back as she saw two figures instead of one upon the steps.

"Who is it?" she cried in alarm.

"It is I, Tristram," said a voice that made her heart stand still.

"Oh! what is the matter with Richard?" she cried, forgetting her own emotions, as she caught sight of her husband. "Has there been an accident?"



"No, no," said her cousin, "don't be alarmed. I will take him upstairs at once."

He drew Richard's stumbling feet over the threshold, and relieved him of his hat and coat with some difficulty, while Hylda looked on in terror.

"Let me help you," she said.

"Don't touch him!" cried Tristram, then recovering himself, as she looked at him in astonishment, he added, "you go first and carry the light."

The journey was not an easy one, but the stairs were few, and at last they reached Richard's room.

"Now go for a doctor," said Hylda impatiently, "or, stop, I will call one of the servants," and she was flying out of the room.

Her cousin looked at her helplessly for a moment, then hurried after her and caught her arm.

"Hylda," he said, hoarsely, "don't disturb the servants whatever you do; there is no need for a doctor—let him sleep—he will be all right in the morning."

His own face was white as he spoke, and there were drops upon his forehead; it seemed to him that he was being brutal; but what else could he do?

"I don't understand," she said, faintly.

"Have you never seen him like this before?"

"No, never," she said. "Tristram, do you mean—?" she stopped short and looked at him with a dawning horror in her eyes.

"It is probably only an accident," he said, hurriedly; "he has no doubt had some bad whisky given him, or something of that kind."

She was shuddering from head to foot, and he put out his arm to support her, then drew it back suddenly.

"I am glad that it was I who saw him," he said, catching at any comfort that lay within his reach; "I happened to be passing this way, and saw the cabman set him down."

She looked at him mournfully as he spoke, but made no answer.

"Hylda," he said, "let me stay and help you; I cannot leave you like this."

His heart beat quickly as he waited for her reply; no sound broke the stillness but the heavy breathing of the unconscious man who lay upon the bed.

"You must go," she said at last; "no one must stay with my husband except myself."

He knew that she was right, but none the less he felt as if body and soul were being dragged asunder.

"Is there anything that I ought to do for him?" she said.

He shook his head, feeling that speech was impossible, and took two or three steps away from her, then paused a moment at the top of the staircase with his hand upon the rail.

Hylda went after him and laid her hand lightly on his.

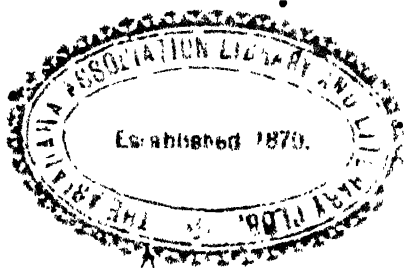
"Tristram," she said, "don't think I am ungrateful."

He turned and looked at her, and a sudden groan burst from his lips; she seemed so fair and pure as she stood before him with the lamplight shining on her bright hair, and her sweet, pale face upraised to his. He clenched his hands tightly, and, leaving her without a word, went down into the hall.

Hylda was not surprised at his silence; she found it difficult enough herself to speak, but just as he was opening the door he put down his hat and came back to her.

"Don't be anxious," he said, "you will find he will be all right in the morning."

He took her hand and dropped it again. "God bless you!" he said, in a voice that was almost a sob, and he was gone before she could speak.



## CHAPTER XIX.

RICHARD WESTON was habitually a temperate man, and he therefore felt more ashamed of himself when he came to his senses than he might otherwise have done; but shame in his nature never resulted in humility, and, having tried unsuccessfully to pass the matter off as a joke, he got rid of his uncomfortable feelings in a storm of bluster.

Hylda would have given anything if she could have kept Tristram's name out of the discussion, but her husband questioned her so closely as to what had happened that a deliberate lie alone could have saved her; he muttered an execration between his teeth when he had heard her story, and sat in gloomy silence.

"Richard," she cried, in alarm, "you must not be angry; it was not his fault. He happened to be passing, and what could he do but come to your help?"

"Happened to be passing!" said Richard, bitterly. "I suppose you call that a coincidence as you did when he appeared at the hotel?"

"How can you be so unjust?" said Hylda, the tears coming to her eyes.

"Don't turn on the waterworks, for goodness' sake!" said Richard; "Nothing makes a woman such a bore as to cry on every conceivable occasion."

A recollection flashed across her mind as he spoke of a day when he had found her in tears at the Manor, and had told her that he had never seen her look so lovely before, and that she must promise him never to cry except when he was there to see; it faded as quickly as it came, however, and she found herself back in the relentless present.

"You ought not to be hard on me," said Richard after a pause; "when a fellow's got such a racking headache as I have, he ought to be treated with consideration."

The remark was evidently meant as an overture of peace, but Hylda scarcely knew how to accept it. The experience had been such a new and humiliating one to her, that she felt as if she could never hold up her head again, and every now and then a sick shudder went over her as she thought of it. There was a cruel sting for her in the thought that Tristram had been a witness of her shame, and now that her husband should put forward his fall as a plea for her consideration, seemed the crowning touch of all; she remained silent, unable to utter a word.

Richard, however, interpreted her silence in his own way, and when he went down to the club next evening, it was with full determination to take revenge upon Tristram. No doubt he would make a fine story out of the affair to his own advantage and Richard's disgrace; it was mere self-defence, therefore, to give him something else to think about.

There was one member of the Arts and Crafts to whom Richard had always felt strongly drawn. He was a young man, with a spare figure and an eye like a hawk's, upon whose card appeared the inscription — "Mr. Fortescue Toulmin, Commissioner."

What Mr. Fortescue Toulmin's commission was had never yet been revealed, but that it was a source of profit might be inferred from his general appearance. Richard admired success in others almost as much as he admired it in himself, and he had already made many confidences to Mr. Toulmin's ready ear. It was to this new-found friend that his thoughts turned now, and he deemed himself fortunate when just as he arrived at the club, he was hailed by the very man of whom he was in search.

"You look a bit down in the mouth," said Toulmin as they entered the smoking room.

"I'm all right," said Richard shortly. "But I want to consult you about something; have you a few minutes to spare?"

"As many as you like,"

They sat down in a secluded corner of the room, and having lit a cigar, Richard proceeded to state the case, keeping back nothing but his real reason for desiring vengeance.

"You want to help your friend to get this seat from Carlyle?" said Toulmin, when they had finished.

"Yes."

"And you want me to assist you?"

"Yes; I should not allow you to be a loser in the affair, of course. Any time or trouble—"

"Oh, yes," said the other, "but let us speak plainly first; I never beat about the bush in a matter of business. You mean that you want to harm Carlyle in the eyes of the constituency?"

Richard winced a little. "I have strong reasons for believing that he is not so admirable as he makes himself appear," he said, "and that truth and honesty demand—"

"Oh, yes, I see!" interrupted Mr. Toulmin. "We understand one another very well. Well, let me think what I can do for you. Bennington is an agricultural district, I believe; can we bring something against him as a landlord?—some martyred poacher?—some aged widow starving in a hovel on his estate?"

"I am afraid not," said Richard. "I have been down to his place lately, and, unfortunately, I couldn't find a hole to pick."

"Well, shall we tabulate a list of his political inconsistencies? I never came across a politician yet from whose speeches one could not disinter a host of contradictions."

"No; we must have something more popular than that. Hodge cares nothing for abstractions."

"Well, there are more strings to the bow yet. Can we find a flaw in his moral character? The Nonconformist conscience is probably pretty active down there."

"Yes, it is," said Richard. "I heard that from Rhodes. But Carlyle's faults are not concrete enough for the purpose. It's a confounded nuisance that he is not a villain."

"Now, there you are wrong," said Toulmin; "the whiter a man is, the easier it is to blacken him."

"I did not say I wanted to blacken him," said Richard, a little uneasily.

"Say!" remarked the other, with infinite scorn. "Of course you did not say it; no one would be such a fool as to say such a thing as that! But, look here, Weston, do you mean business? Because if not, I can't waste my time here."

Richard took his cigar out of his mouth, and looked at it carefully before he answered. He did mean business, but he did not want to say so, and, apparently, Mr. Toulmin was skilled in reading faces, for he went on without waiting for a reply.

"Now, what do you think of this?" he said. "There is nothing that so much excites the Nonconformist conscience at the present moment as gambling. Does Carlyle gamble?"

"Never," said Richard, dejectedly.

"Has he ever said so in public?"

"Yes, he has. There were some scandalous scenes at the Bennington races last year, and he refused to subscribe for that reason, and stated his opinions in the local papers; so we can't get him there."

"Can't we?" said Toulmin drily. "If he had not publicly stated his opinions, it would have been no go, but, now—just wait a bit! I can work this little job in beautifully with another that I've got on hand at the present moment; and, what's more, I can do it for you next week. As it happens, I have been engaged by a man I know, in the detective force, to help in a raid on a gambling club. They've been working at it for months, but have only just got evidence to procure a warrant. Now, if you can manage to get Carlyle to the club on the night of the raid, I will undertake that he shall be arrested."

"But everyone will soon know that he wasn't gambling."

"That is not so sure as you think. He will tell his story, of course, but the fact will remain that he was arrested in a gaming-house; and, judiciously applied, it will convince nine-tenths of the electors that he is a double-dyed hypocrite. Now, what do you say?"

"I think it will do excellently," said Richard, after a moment's pause.

"Very well, then. It is not everyone in whom I would repose such confidence as I have done in you. I need not tell you that if you let out the fact that I have betrayed the proposed raid, I am done for."

"I shall be equally done for if you let out my scheme," said Richard; "so we are quits. But there are one or two difficult points. How can we get Carlyle to the house? and, having got him there, how is he to be admitted? The porter of such a club is generally a Cerberus!"

"Naturally, but Cerberus may be outwitted. Having told you so much, there is no harm in telling you a little more. It is an unheard-of thing for an outsider to be employed in a raid of this kind, but no one in the force could play the part I am to play. The porter of this club is a very dragon, but, for purposes which I need not enter upon now, I had to make friends with him some time ago, and have once or twice even acted as his substitute. My detective friend knows this, though he does not know a good deal that underlies it; and the long and short of it is that I shall be acting porter next week, while the other man goes for his holiday."

"That seems a dangerous game for you to play," said Richard.

"Nothing to what I have done before, and shall do again. Neither the porter nor any of his friends have ever seen me, except in disguise, and I know how to take care of myself. Your little affair can easily be managed along with the rest, and no one will ever be any the wiser. Get a letter sent to Carlyle, making an appointment at the club with some fictitious personage. I will admit him, and put him to wait in the smoking-room; and though, of course, I shall have to be gagged and bound when the raid is made, you may be certain that the officers will not let him escape. All you will have to do is to read the account in the newspapers!"

Richard felt greatly relieved by the last sentence, for though his heart was set on revenge he had no taste for discovery.

"You had better see about your letter in good time," said Toulmin, as he rose to go, "and let me know what you have said to him. Tuesday night, remember, and tell him not to come before ten o'clock; we must not give him too long to wait."

Richard went home that night with his brain on fire. If anyone had told him a year ago that he would have condescended to mix himself up in such a plot he would have given them the lie direct; he had always been so entirely satisfied with his own principles and conduct that it had never occurred to him that he could by any possibility fall.

In the same way, although he knew that he had not succeeded in establishing the full sway over his wife that he had intended to do, it never struck him that he himself might be to blame. There must be some other reason for his failure, and this reason he felt that he had found when he heard from Flo of Hylda's meeting with Tristram. The power of jealousy has never yet been estimated; it will stifle reason and silence mercy, it will even slay love itself; it is black as night and cruel as the grave, and the coals of it are as coals of fire. Having once allowed such a passion to enter his heart, Richard was helpless in its grasp, and there was hardly a crime of which he would not have been capable.

He was quite ready therefore for the task that lay before him, and, setting to work, he carefully disguised his handwriting, and wrote a note to Sir Tristram, which he signed by the name of Christopher Carfrae, asking for an interview on important political business, and adding that as he was an old man and should only be in London a few hours he should be very grateful if Sir Tristram would call at his club about ten o'clock. This letter he took out with him on Sunday morning, and, having told Hylda that he was going for a long expedition and should not be back till late, he took the train to Bennington, posted the letter, and came back to town.

So far so good, but Richard felt restless and uneasy, and though he knew that he was risking something, a chance meeting with Jock Chesterford was too tempting for his prudence.



"Is Sir Tristram in town?" he asked, in as careless a voice as he could muster.

"He is," said Jock, rather coldly. "Did you wish to see him?"

"Oh, no, I was only wondering whether he had gone back to Stowbury yet."

Jock stared at him stonily as much as to say, "What business is it of yours?" but having found out what he wanted to know Richard cared not a jot for his impertinence.

Mr. Christopher Carfrae's letter was duly received by Sir Tristram, opened and read.

"Do you remember that name among my Bennington correspondents?" he said, handing it to young Chesterford.

"I cannot say that I do," replied Jock. "Shall I write and see whether it is really important?"

"There is no time for that; besides, he gives no address but Bennington. I had better see him; this is a critical time, and as it happens I am dining out in that direction to-morrow."

At half-past ten on the following evening Sir Tristram Carlyle rang the bell of an unobtrusive-looking house in a quiet street, and was immediately let in by a black-bearded man in a porter's livery.

"Is Mr. Christopher Carfrae staying here?" he asked.

"He will be in directly, sir," said Toulmin, who knew the baronet well by sight; "will you sit down a few minutes?"

He led the way to the smoking-room, and collecting a handful of papers, laid them on a small table.

Left to himself, Sir Tristram looked at a newspaper for a little while, then, yielding to the fatigue induced by a long day's work followed by a hot and tiring dinner-party, he fell asleep.

Preparations were meanwhile on foot outside. A band of reserve policemen who had been told off for the duty during the day began to draw near to the marked spot from all points of the compass, and hardly had the clocks done striking eleven when a tall man in evening dress with

an overcoat thrown back over his shoulders, strolled leisurely down the street and gave a careless glance at the house as he passed. In that careless glance, however, he had learned from a pre-arranged signal that gambling was in full swing, and having walked back to the end of the street, he turned again towards the club. Just as he reached the steps two men came up behind him, reeling from side to side as though intoxicated; he stopped to look at them, and, lunging up one against the other, they set to with fists and tongues; the noise increased every moment, and at last the porter opened the door and ordered the combatants off.

Quick as thought the men were up the steps, seized and bound the porter, threw him aside and dashed into the house, followed by the group of men who had been acting the part of idle lookers-on. Upstairs they went, and Tristram, starting up from his chair, became aware of steps and voices outside; still confused with sleep, he opened the door and found himself in a passage where the lights had been put out, and along which he groped his way.

The steps were behind him now, coming nearer every moment, and as he stretched out his hand to find the wall he received a violent blow that flung him against the door at the end of the passage; the door gave way before him and the disguised officers rushed into the room.

A scene of the wildest confusion followed; over went the table, money showered down upon the floor amid a snow-storm of cards, chairs fell in all directions, and struggling men hurled blows and curses recklessly around them. The tall man in evening dress who had first appeared upon the scene stood calmly in the midst of the tumult, and no general on the field of battle could have commanded his troops with greater coolness. As soon as the first batch of gamblers had been secured he signed to the officers in charge to open the door, and a smile curled his lip as a few who were yet free slipped past them into the passage. He knew well that every exit from the house was guarded, and they would be found as soon as they were wanted.

"This one can wait a bit," he said, looking at Tristram, who lay quietly on the floor where he had first fallen;

"we'll come back for him later. You may as well put him on the sofa, he seems to have had a blow."

He walked off as he spoke, leaving two men in charge of the room; and it was not till cupboards, curtains, and all other lurking-places had been examined, and one unfortunate being with a dressing-gown flung on over his clothes had been dragged out of the bed where he lay innocently slumbering, that he came back to secure the apparatus that was necessary for the final proof of his case.

"Knock the tops off the tables," was his first command, and his eyes glistened at the sight of the faint chalk lines which were thus displayed to view.

"Collect the cards and counters," was his next order, "and don't leave any chalked string behind. And, now, what are we to do with this one?" he added. "We must get him to the station somehow."

"Drunk and incapable," said one of the men, with a judicial air.

"No more drunk than you are!" retorted the superintendent. "See here," and he lifted a lock of hair that covered the mark of a blow, "he is stunned, that's all."

"Caught in the act," said the other, determined to make his voice heard; and he tried to open the hand in which Tristram had clenched one of the fluttering cards as he fell.

"Leave it alone, you idiot," said the superintendent, sharply, and the unconscious man was borne downstairs, and driven triumphantly to the police-station, with the knave of clubs clasped firmly in his hand.

"Well, are you satisfied?" said a voice in Richard's ear next evening, as he sat devouring a pile of special editions in the smoking-room of the Arts and Crafts.

Richard started; he had been so carried away by the vivid descriptions of the scene that he could hardly believe that he saw aright, when Mr. Toulmin, clean shaven and alert as ever, took a seat by his side.

"Hush!" he said, in a warning voice, as he noticed Richard's start. "Follow me into the writing-room in five minutes; there is no one there."

"Are you not running a fearful risk?" said Richard, as he went up to his friend at the appointed time.

"Not at all; the club people attach no blame to me. I took myself home as soon as I was released from my bonds, dropped my make-up over Waterloo Bridge, went to bed, and got up this morning as you see me."

"But will you not be searched for?"

"Very probably; but they may search till they are tired. The 'burly hall porter' has disappeared, and left not a wrack behind! But now to business. Fortune has favoured us; I did what I could for you, but I could not have arranged that our friend should be taken cards in hand. It was a splendid climax!"

"We may as well square up at once," said Richard, who felt an unaccountable repugnance to discussing the matter any further. "Will this put us straight?" and he held out a twenty-pound note.

"H'm!" said Toulmin. "I'm sorry to seem grasping, my dear fellow, but I really couldn't do it at the price. I played your game at great hazard to myself, and, in fact, I'm afraid you must make it fifty."

Richard was considerably taken aback by this demand, but he dared not make any demur; he had put himself in Toulmin's power, and he must submit to his extortions; he promised to bring the required notes, but he felt that his triumph had been damped.

It was not till he sat down to write to Ralph Rhodes that his spirits returned.

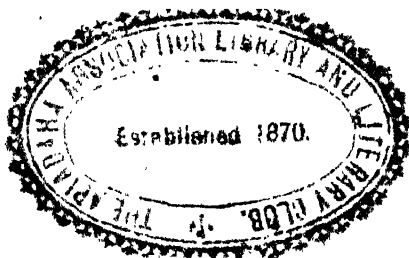
"A chance for you at last!" he began. "I am sending you all the evening papers I could lay hands upon. After Carlyle's recent deliverances on gambling, his behaviour is really rather too rank! I have no doubt he will make some defence as soon as he is well enough to appear, but nothing can alter the fact that he was seized in a gambling-house with cards in his possession. Strike while the iron is hot, and you ought to make the seat your own."

Rhodes found the letter and packet on his return from Yarmouth, where he had been for a brief respite from his warfare. He felt no surprise when he read the news; in his eyes aristocrat and villain were synonymous terms, and

he was merely thankful that his opponent had been at last unmasked.

There was to be a meeting that night in a Nonconformist schoolroom, at which he had been asked to speak. His indignation was at white heat, and the whole nervous energy of the man quivered and palpitated in his words. His speech was a masterpiece; he seemed to grow not only in force but in actual height and strength, as he hurled out his invectives against the evil-minded tyrants, who would rob poor men of their pleasures that they might the better enjoy their own secret vices, and called upon his hearers, as they valued their rights, as they valued their freedom—as they valued their own souls—to stand together, and prove to the so-called “nobles” that they were baser than the dirt beneath an honest beggar’s feet, and that a man who did his betting openly in the light of day was a thousand times more honourable than a knave of clubs!

Thunders of applause followed his words, and while Tristram, upon his uneasy bed, troubled and confused in mind and body, was comforting himself with the thought of the universal sympathy that would be accorded him, his name was being hissed to the echo by the very people who, a few months before, had thought no cheers too loud for him, and his effigy—crowned with a fool’s cap and decorated with playing cards—was being hurried along to a fiery doom, while the populace of Bennington followed it with vehement cries of “Down with the Knave of Clubs!”



## CHAPTER XX.

Success and glory are dear to the hearts of all men, but glory's crown of glory is to be able to lay success at the feet of a beloved one. Ralph Rhodes had never tasted a greater rapture than when he went down to Yarmouth after the General Election, to announce his victory to Ellen Weston.

It was a bitter February day, with a cold wind blowing across a frozen sky, but, so far as he was concerned, it might have been midsummer, for there was a warmth at his heart that defied the elements. The result of the Bennington election had been announced late in the afternoon, and as soon as Rhodes had interviewed all the necessary people, and pledged his supporters at the dinner at the committee rooms, he excused himself on the plea of urgent business, and taking a night train travelled down to Yarmouth that he might be first with the news.

The Weston family were assembled at breakfast when he walked in with joy beaming in his face, and there was a general shout of congratulation.

From the first Mr. Weston had been a disbeliever in his future son-in-law's success; his opinion of the aristocracy was as high as Ralph's was low, and he had declared repeatedly that no constituency would be mad enough to pass over a man of wealth and position, and elect a fellow with no ballast in his pocket to give him steadiness, and no stake in the country to give him zeal. Ellen had tried to argue the matter with him once or twice, but it had cost her too much, and of late she had kept entire silence, only relieving her feelings by long letters to her lover, in which

she poured out her admiration for his highmindedness and her sorrow at Sir Tristram's disgraceful fall. But now that the fact was placed beyond dispute, and the once despised journalist had blossomed out before his eyes into a Member of Parliament, Mr. Weston was not ashamed to own himself vanquished.

"I never thought you had it in you," he said, clapping Ralph heartily on the shoulder; "but I'm willing to own I made a mistake, and as soon as Ellen has got her fal-lals ready, we'll have the grandest wedding that Yarmouth has ever seen."

"Does Dick know?" cried Jo, taking up the burden. "Won't he be on the high ropes, that's all!"

"Oh, yes, he knows," said Ralph; "the news was telegraphed to London last night."

"But he won't be best pleased at Carlyle being beaten," remarked Mr. Weston; "it's all very well, but when it comes to one's own wife's cousin——"

"Ah, but Richard is so disinterested," interrupted Ralph. "I must say that I have done him an injustice in the past. I always thought his Radicalism was mere talk, but he has proved it now by deeds; if it had not been for his help I should never have got in."

"Don't talk about Radicalism," said Mr. Weston; "I don't want the pleasant taste taken out of my mouth with such words as that. However, I see what you mean about Richard, and though I can't agree with him, I allow that he must be sincere to act as he has done."

This, from the obstinate old Conservative, was such an extraordinary concession that by itself it would have made the day remarkable, and every face beamed anew.

There was only one tongue silent in the chorus, and that one strangely enough belonged to the voluble Flo. From the first moment that Richard's name had been mentioned a cloud had come over her brow, and, though no one observed it, she uttered not a word in response to the general laudation of his conduct.

Flo's conscience was not a sensitive one, but she had several times felt a vague discomfort when she remembered the way in which her brother had received her

information about Sir Tristram. Her speech had been merely the result of ill-humour, and she had expected that Richard would forget it again directly. But, greatly to her surprise, he had listened eagerly to all that she had to tell, and though at the time she had been flattered by the excitement she had created, she had of late felt uneasy whenever the recollection crossed her mind.

None of the others seemed to notice that Hylda's letters became fewer and fewer, and that all mention of her had gradually dropped out of Richard's lengthy epistles to his mother; his work, his plans, his ideas, filled up their pages, and Hylda apparently lived a life apart. Such a point as this was not likely to strike either Mr. or Mrs. Weston, and as for Jo, he never took the trouble to read his brother's letters at all; Ellen might have discovered that something was amiss if she had not been so wrapped up in her own concerns, but as it was there was no one who took any heed except the one whose guilty conscience had awakened her perceptions.

When Ralph first brought the news of Sir Tristram's predicament, Flo was more startled than she would have liked to own; she could not believe that her brother was in any way responsible, and yet the whole affair seemed to her very mysterious. As soon as Sir Tristram was able to exert himself he had stated the facts of the case, and though there were plenty of people besides the Bennington electors who shrugged their shoulders and wondered how anyone could expect such a palpable absurdity to be accepted, there were many who were ready to take up the cudgels in his cause.

The controversy raged hotly in the papers; the Radical press denounced the vices and corruptions of the aristocracy, as personified in the Sanctimonius Baronet who grudged the poor man his pleasure while he secretly indulged his own; while the Conservative organs thundered forth invectives at the vile plot against one of the upholders of the State, and urged upon all true patriots to do their utmost to unearth its originators.

Richard, from his safe vantage ground, watched the conflict with interest; he had no fears for himself, and he



saw that however much Sir Tristram's friends might say in his behalf, the tide of popular feeling remained unchanged. Nor was this the only way in which he had succeeded in harming his enemy, for the blow, followed by so much anxiety and trouble, had taken a severe effect upon his health.

But though Richard had every cause to feel satisfied with the success of his scheme, he was no happier than he had been before. His love for his wife still existed, though it was poisoned by jealousy, and he had looked forward to a renewal of her old worship of him so soon as her faith in her cousin was destroyed. But, contrary to his expectations, Hylda gave not the slightest credence to the accusation; nothing that he could say had the least effect upon her, and, losing his self-control at last, he uttered words that drove every vestige of colour from her cheek.

"I cannot stay to be insulted, Richard," she said.

"Well, go," he answered brutally; "I would not lift a finger to keep you."

She shuddered from head to foot, and, for a moment, a wild longing took possession of her to fly from the horrors of her lot and seek refuge in some calm depth of darkness, but she thrust back the thought with the strength of desperation, and, with a cry for help upon her lips, schooled herself to patience.

As day after day passed on, however, she felt her endurance slowly ebbing away. She could not risk a visit from her mother, when all her letters from the Manor teemed with indignant reproaches against Ralph Rhodes; she made one attempt to obtain Ellen's sympathy, but the reply she received was so entirely taken up with praises of her lover that she never made a second. There was nothing for it but to suffer in silence.

The news of Tristram's defeat was flung at her disdainfully by her husband, when he came in from his club, on the evening of its publication. She received it without a word; but, when she thought of seeing Ralph Rhodes, and hearing his vehement rejoicings over his opponent's discomfiture, she felt that there could be nothing worse for her to bear.

Many people have said the same thing, however, who have yet had to learn that the future holds more bitter pangs for them than they have ever experienced in the past.

Ralph Rhodes returned to London in a state of delight that brooked no repression. Congratulations had poured in upon him since his election, and, moreover, his wedding was fixed to take place during the Easter recess, so that the days seemed all too short for the multiplicity of things that had to be crowded into them.

Richard was more restless and uncertain in temper than ever, and Hylda was thankful whenever he came home to dinner, for though he did not favour her with much of his society, she felt that he was safe when he was in his study. Her dreams of aiding him in his work had all come to nought, but she still cherished a hope that he might one day turn to her for assistance, if only some of his time was spent at home.

"Have you much writing to do to-night?" she asked, as he came in one evening with a bundle of papers in his hand.

"Yes, I have some proofsheets to look over that must go off by to-night's post."

He despatched his dinner quickly, maintaining a gloomy silence throughout the meal, and much as Hylda longed to offer to help him, she did not dare to do so; she went into the drawing-room when it was over, and taking up a book tried to forget her thoughts. Ten o'clock struck, eleven o'clock, and still nothing was heard from the study; she got up once and crept to the door but could not summon up courage to enter, but the letters must be posted before midnight, and when a quarter past eleven struck she got up resolutely and went to the study.

"Richard," she said, "it is getting very late; can I help you?"

There was no answer, and going nearer she saw that his head had fallen forward and that he was breathing heavily. Instinctively she looked round and saw at once what she had dreaded and yet expected to see—a half-empty whisky bottle upon the table!

But this time she had not the shock of bewilderment to contend with, and she went up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Richard," she said, "are your letters ready?"

He mumbled something in an indistinct tone and moved a little under her touch, but his head soon fell forward again and she saw there was no hope of rousing him. Two directed envelopes lay upon the table, and the proofsheets were folded ready for enclosure; she took them up without looking at him again and inserted them in their respective covers.

Since her invasion of his study he had chosen to keep everything locked up, but his keys lay upon the desk: she opened it and began to search among its multifarious contents for the necessary stamps, and as she did so her eye was caught by a well-known name.

"Sir Tristram Carlyle, Bart." Over and over again the words appeared in a curious twisted handwriting that was totally unfamiliar to her; but as she turned the paper she stood transfixed, for there in her husband's own hand was a copy of the very letter that she had seen quoted so many times in the newspapers. From the first she felt no doubt that it was his own composition, for words were altered here and there and the final form was the one that was stamped upon her brain. Richard had conceived and carried out his scheme without a hitch, but, like most plotters, he had left a weak spot in his defences, and though he would no doubt have imagined that the paper was absolutely safe under his private lock and key, he had not realised that for a man to put an enemy into his mouth that steals away his brains is to lay himself open to disaster.

Hylda looked at the unconscious figure beside her with a curious gleam in her eyes; she folded the paper and put it in her pocket, weighed and stamped the letters, re-locked the desk, and put the keys back where she had found them, then wrapping herself in a shawl she went out and posted the proofsheets at the neighbouring pillar box.

It was long before Richard woke, and until Hylda heard him move she kept her solitary watch in the next room;

the grey dawn was just appearing in the sky when at length she succeeded in getting him upstairs, but she did not utter one word of her discovery then, nor yet when he came down grumbling and yawning to a late breakfast.

"I can't go to the office to-day," he said, as he pushed away his untasted food; "I must let the chief know somehow before eleven o'clock."

"I will take a note, if you like," said Hylda; "I have some shopping to do."

"All right; you can just give it to one of the clerks. I shall say I have an attack of lumbago."

If he expected this remark to provoke a remonstrance from his wife he was disappointed, for she said nothing.

Hylda's pale face and weary eyes excited the compassion of more than one of her fellow-travellers on the Underground that morning, but there was something in her look that prevented any of those who pitied her from offering her their assistance; she had formed her purpose in the dark hours of the preceding night, and had counted its cost.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell was sitting in his private room when a clerk came up to know if he could speak to Mrs. Weston. It was many months since he had seen Hylda, but he was not so startled by the change in her appearance as others among her friends had been; he had taken his own estimate of Richard during the time that they had worked together, and the estimate was not a high one. But though he was not surprised, he was grieved to see the look that had settled upon her face, and his voice when he spoke was full of sympathy.

"How do you do, Mrs. Weston?" he said. "Come and sit down."

Hylda took no notice of his outstretched hand, nor of the offered chair; her nerves were braced up for a great effort, and she could think of nothing else until it had been made.

"I have come to you because I have no one else to consult," she said. "Will you look at this?"

She drew the paper from her pocket as she spoke, and handing it to him, sat down as though her strength was suddenly exhausted.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell looked at it for a few moments in silence, then raising his head he said gently, "Why did you bring this to me?"

"Because I did not know what I ought to do about it; my husband does not know that I have seen it, he must have thought that he had destroyed it. He will never forgive me when he knows, but an innocent man has been wronged, and if I can do anything——" her voice died away, and her face turned whiter, if possible, than it had been before.

There was a moment's pause, during which Mr. Dudley-Hartnell looked at her with a pity that choked his utterance; but it was cruel to keep her in suspense, and he cleared his throat to speak.

"Sir Tristram knows this already," he said.

"Knows it!" cried Hylda, starting forward in amazement.

"Yes, so far as belief without absolute proof will go."

"But how, I don't understand!"

"I will tell you all I know. There is no harm in doing so now, though it was told me in confidence. When the matter of this letter was first investigated, Sir Tristram's secretary told him that he thought he had a clue if he might follow it up, and, as Sir Tristram was ill at the time he left it to his discretion. Chesterford went to a private detective, taking the letter with him, and, after long study of your husband's handwriting, and an enquiry at Bennington which elicited the fact that he had been there on the Sunday when the letter was posted, they felt little doubt in their own minds. Not a soul was told of their suspicion except myself; they were obliged to find out something about Weston's movements from me, but to no one else has a word been breathed."

"But what gave him the first clue?" interrupted Hylda.

"Your husband's manner when he questioned him about Sir Tristram on the Monday. But let me finish my story. As soon as Sir Tristram could be troubled about business they went to him and asked him what should be done, and his answer was 'Nothing.' He told them in reply to

their arguments that everyone for whose opinion he cared believed his story, and this being so he did not see that anything would be gained by fixing the forgery of the letter on to any particular pair of shoulders, and that he wished that the whole thing should be allowed to die a natural death. You see, therefore, that you could not tell him anything that he does not know already, and my advice to you is to put that paper quietly in the fire."

He expected to see a gleam of relief pass over her face, but her expression remained unchanged.

"That may be quite right from my cousin's point of view," she said, "but there is something else to be considered; if Richard has done such a thing once he may do it again."

There was a thrill of anguish in her voice as she spoke that was very terrible to hear.

"That is not for you or me to say," said the editor, gravely. "At any rate we have no right to accuse him if Sir Tristram does not choose to do so; the matter affects him, and he must decide it."

"Then I am to do nothing?"

"No; unless you tell him that you have found the paper, and urge him to make his own confession. Is that too difficult?" he added, seeing the look of dismay that crossed her face.

"It would be very hard," she answered, in a low tone; "but if it is for his good I will try to do it. In that case I must keep the paper," and she held out her hand for it.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell saw the effort with which she spoke, but he had no conception of the magnitude of the task which he had imposed; his own chivalry was so strong that it was impossible for him to imagine the kind of treatment to which Richard subjected his wife. He knew that the man was not a gentleman, he saw that he was obstinate and overbearing, but he could not believe that he was otherwise than tender to the fair young creature whose lot was bound up with his.

"There is one other thing that I will tell you now," he said, as she rose to go, "I am afraid it will come as a blow to your husband, but I have no alternative. I have

discovered that during the last election he sold his pen to both parties, and that he has in other ways violated the agreement that was drawn up at the time of his joining our staff. I would spare him if I could, but I have no choice in the matter, and I am writing to him to-day to tell him that his work in the office must cease at the end of the quarter."

Hylda's consternation was so great that she could not speak, and the editor looked at her with some compunction.

"It seems cruel to tell you," he said, "and yet it seemed to me that it would be more cruel to leave you in ignorance of what was coming."

"You did right to tell me," she answered, and gathering herself up as if to meet an impending fate, she left the office without another word.

Richard went out as usual that evening, and Hylda scanned the letters anxiously when the last post came in; there was one in the editor's well-known handwriting, and her heart sank as she looked at it. But Richard said nothing when he opened it, nor did he allude to it next day.

"I wrote to the University Extension delegates to-day," he remarked carelessly that evening.

"What did you write about?" asked Hylda, seeing that he waited for a question.

"I wrote to tell them that I was willing to lecture again for them next winter. It is not work that I care for, as you know, but it is less exhausting than journalism, and I think that I shall go back to it."

Hylda hardly knew how to reply; she saw that he was arranging to announce his return to lecturing at the same time as his retirement from the office and so to gloss over the fact of dismissal, but she could not venture to tell him so, and therefore she said nothing.

The matter was not long left in suspense, however; by return of post a letter arrived from the delegates containing a polite intimation that as Mr. Weston had left their staff without consulting their convenience on obtaining a post that suited him better, they could not consider his proposition of rejoining it.

Richard flung down the letter with an angry exclamation. "You can read it if you like," he said, "they are a pack of fools, and I will have nothing more to do with them."

The threat was gratuitous to say the least, the delegates having already resolved to have nothing more to do with him, but Hylda would not irritate him by saying so.

"I was afraid that they would not like your throwing up your engagements so suddenly last year," she said, "but I am very sorry that they should have refused your request."

"It is weary work," said Richard, leaning his head on his hand with a disheartened look; "life is not worth living at this rate."

Hylda had not seen the softer side of his nature for so long that she felt a thrill of hope.

"Richard," she said gently, "there is something that I have been wanting to say to you for two or three days, but I have not liked to worry you."

"I don't want any fresh worries by any means," said Richard, the frown returning to his brow. "I have not told you yet that the editor has chosen to turn me off. It is a disgusting piece of treachery, but of course I am powerless to prevent it."

Hylda felt her hands turning cold, but the opportunity was too good to be lost, and she felt that she must not let it slip.

"There is something I want you to do," she said, not stopping to pick her words, "something that would put all this on a better footing. See here, Richard," and she drew out the fateful paper.

Richard snatched it from her in dismay. "Where did you get that?" he said.

"I found it in your desk the other night when—when I had to get your letters ready for the post."

"And like an idiot you have been imagining all kinds of things," he said, making a strong effort to recover himself. "Here it goes!" and he tossed it into the fire.

Hylda made no movement to stop him. "What I want you to do," she said steadily, "is to go to Mr. Dudley-Hartnell and tell him all about it. He will feel quite differently about you then."



"My dear Hylda, you are talking perfect folly!" said Richard, impatiently. "Because you find a copy of that letter in my handwriting you jump to the conclusion that I sent it, and not content with that you propose that I should go and accuse myself of doing so. You must be mad!"

"But Mr. Dudley-Hartnell knows it already," said Hylda.

"How do you know that?" asked Richard, turning upon her like a lightning flash.

Hylda had rushed upon her task with desperation, not pausing to think whither it might lead her; but she was ready to dare all now.

"He told me so himself," she said.

"When?" asked her husband, in the same fierce tone.

"When I took your note the other day. I showed him the paper and asked him what I ought to do."

"You showed him that paper?" cried Richard, "I suppose you wish to ruin me!"

Hylda did not notice the tacit admission of his guilt.

"No, Richard," she said, "I wish to save you."

"Don't talk that canting humbug to me! Tell me exactly what he said, or I'll shake it out of you by main force."

He stood over her threateningly, but she did not shrink; her nerves were strung up to the supreme pitch of endurance.

"He told me that Mr. Chesterford had employed a private detective, and that they had examined your handwriting. That you were seen at Bennington the day the letter was posted, and that Mr. Chesterford——"

"That meddling young ass ought to have his neck wrung!" muttered Richard. "Well?"

"When Mr. Chesterford told Tristram, he said that he would not have you accused, and that nothing further was to be done about it. Richard, will you not go to him and tell him all?"

"So that is what you want, is it?" he sneered. "I suppose you have been flattering yourself with the idea that he is the soul of generosity and honour! Of course

he is merely keeping this back to serve his own ends; he is a regular snake in the grass, and has been ever since I have known him!"

"Richard, listen to me a moment!" pleaded Hylda in despair; but he went out of the room without paying the slightest attention to her, and locked his study door after him.

Hylda's first thought when she was left alone was one of blame for herself and not for him. If only she had managed better; if she had spoken more wisely, more sympathetically, she might have won him over to the right. But now she felt that he was more hardened than he had been before, and the tears that she shed were for her own failure and not for his reproaches.

She was still sitting where he had left her when there was a loud ring at the door-bell, and she started up hastily as she recognised Ralph's voice in the hall. She could not endure listening to his recitals of the preparations for his wedding at such a juncture as this, and she was intending to escape upstairs, when the door suddenly opened and he walked into the room.

There was something unusual about his manner, and he said nothing while the maid was heard knocking loudly at the study door; but as soon as Richard entered, he unfolded a paper that he held in his hand, and pointed excitedly to a paragraph. "Read that!" he said hoarsely; "it states there that the writer of that letter has been discovered, and that it is none other than the sub-editor of the *Monthly Review*. Refute it, for God's sake!"

His eyes were glittering, and the hand that touched Richard's was as cold as death.

"It is a scandalous lie," began Richard, but his nerves were shaken by all that he had passed through, and he could not command his tongue.

"It is true!" said Ralph, in a terrible voice, great drops coming out upon his forehead.

There was silence for a moment, while Richard stood with his eyes fixed upon the paper, struggling for composure, and Hylda leaned against the mantelpiece with her hand pressed against her heart.

Ralph was the first to speak. "I would forgive you any crime of your own for Ellen's sake," he said; "but I can never forgive you for involving me in crime.. Good-bye for ever!" and he turned and left the house.

"Stop, you fool!" exclaimed Richard, darting after him; but it was too late, the door was shut, and he was gone.

"It will be all over London to-morrow," said Richard, coming back, and tearing the paper across in a fury. "This is your precious cousin's doing. I told you he would take his revenge; but, by Heaven, he shall repent it."

"Dear Richard," said Hylda, going up to him, and trying to take his hand, "it is not too late yet. If you will only——"

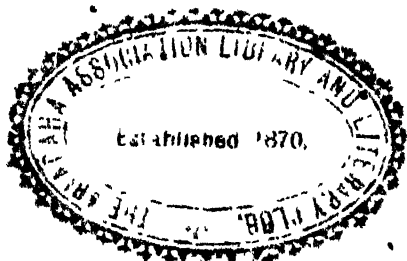
"I tell you it is too late," said Richard, harshly. "My career is ruined, my name blackened! It's enough to drive a man mad. I shall not stay in England to be put in the pillory."

"Richard, Richard," she sobbed, "you will not leave me?"

"I shall. You took precious good care to secure your own money, so you can stay and enjoy yourself."

She looked up at him with a dazed expression, and clung the tighter to his arm.

"Let go, will you," he said, and, pushing her away, he hurled himself out of the room, while Hylda, her strength exhausted, her heart breaking, tottered helplessly a step or two forward, and then fell heavily to the ground.



## CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN Hylda awoke to consciousness, the lamps had burned out and all was dark. The servants had gone to bed at their usual time, and, accustomed to their master's late hours, had paid no heed to any noises below. She could not at first remember what had happened, and turned herself uneasily, wondering why the bed was so hard, and why she felt so stiff and chilled; but, as the recollection came back to her, she started up in terror, and stared wildly about her.

"Where is Richard?" was the first thought that disentangled itself from the confusion of her ideas, and groping about for the matches, she lit a candle. No one, apparently, had entered the room since he left it; the torn pieces of newspaper still strewed the floor, and the chair that she had clutched in her fall lay undisturbed. She picked it up, and put the room to rights that the servants' suspicions might not be aroused, then, going upstairs, she opened the door of Richard's dressing-room. All was in disorder; drawers had been hastily pulled out and their contents thrown upon the floor, his bag was gone, his ulster, and his travelling rug. She could not at first take in the meaning of it all, but as she went nearer she saw an envelope lying on the dressing-table, and taking it up, found that it contained a hastily-written message.

"You will never see me again. Thanks to T. C. I am done for, and you can make merry over it.—R."

The cruel words gave her a stab of anguish, but she did not dare to let herself give way; the dawn was breaking, the servants would soon be about, and if it was possible

to keep her secret she must do so. She went into her bedroom and having bathed her face she put on her dressing-gown and lay down; her shoulder had been severely bruised in her fall, and the pain of it would have prevented her from sleeping even if her mind had been at ease, but as it was she lay in feverish unrest until the maid came to call her.

Hylda had made up her mind by this time what to do, and having said that Mr. Weston was out and that she should breakfast in her own room, she dressed as well as her aching arm would allow her, and went to the nearest telegraph office. There was only one person whom she could send for, but she knew that he would come.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell had a number of engagements for that morning, but when Hylda's telegram was brought to him he got up at once from the breakfast-table, and told his man to call a cab.

"I knew you would come!" was Hylda's greeting when he was shown in, and in a few brief words, she told him her story.

"This is what he wrote," she said, handing him the paper.

"Your arm is hurt!" he exclaimed, as he saw the difficulty with which she moved it.

"I fell and bruised it," she said quickly, seeing the thought that passed through his mind. "You must not think more hardly of him than he deserves."

The editor did not speak for a minute. "Of course that is all nonsense about Carlyle," he said, at length. "He is not a man to break his word, as Weston must know. I heard about this affair yesterday as soon as the *Trumpet* came out. The editor got wind of the story through the enquiries that were made at Bennington, and thought that he was doing a public service by making it known."

"But he was risking an action for libel if it had not been true," said Hylda.

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell smiled in spite of his sadness. "There is nothing he would have liked better," he said; "however, as it happens he is correct in his facts. Such

things are sure to come to light sooner or later. I don't know what will be done with Rhodes, it is just the kind of thing to upset him completely, and, in spite of all his extravagances, he is such an honest fellow——" he broke off abruptly, for his eulogy of Rhodes was a condemnation of Richard.

"Had you not better see your cousin and ask his advice?" he said, by way of changing the subject.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Hylda, in alarm; "he must not come here. I cannot see him!"

A light broke in upon the editor's mind as she looked entreatingly at him, and he drew his chair a little nearer to her.

"Mrs. Weston," he said, in a low tone, "I cannot help you unless you tell me all. Was there any quarrel between Sir Tristram and your husband?"

"There was no quarrel," said Hylda, her breath coming and going painfully as she spoke; "but—", she stopped, unable to frame her words.

"I understand," he said, and said no more.

"You cannot stay here alone," he began again, after a pause. "You are too shaken by all that has passed. But, first of all, I will find out if Weston has left England; that fact can be discovered without much difficulty, and we shall then know better how to act. I will see you again to-morrow."

The long day passed for Hylda in a dream of pain; there was no one to whom she could speak, no one to whom she could write, for she dared not breathe a word as yet to Richard's people. There was nothing to be done but to wait, and watch, and listen, till she felt her heart growing sick.

The hours crept away at length, night came and passed, and before ten o'clock next morning Mr. Dudley-Hartnell was with her again.

"I have found out where he is," he said, "I put the proper forces in motion without delay, and word was sent to me this morning that a man answering to the description given took a passage in a ship that left for Australia last night. You may relieve yourself of your worst fears;

he evidently means no desperate deed, for he went to his bankers yesterday and drew out a considerable sum of money. \* If you write at once your letters will catch him up overland, and we will hope that he will soon come back in a better frame of mind."

Hylda tried to respond to the kindness of his look; but her smile was more sad than tears; nothing could alter the fact that Richard had left her in anger, and that if he returned to her it would only be with a ruined career and a dishonoured name.

"You are too weary to know what to do," he said, passionately. "I will see Carlyle and Rhodes, and make all necessary explanations, if you will go to your mother. Let me stay and see you off by the midday train; even if your husband returns at once it cannot be for some days, and the change and rest will help you to face the problems of the future."

Hylda could not express any pleasure at the idea, but it seemed less unbearable than any other, and she went languidly away to arrange matters with the servants and pack a few things to take with her.

It was not until she was in the train that she began to dread the thought of meeting her mother. It would, of course, be useless to try and conceal what had happened, for it would speedily appear in every paper, but it was a terrible thing to have to tell.

She left her luggage at the station, and walked over to the Manor that she might have a little further respite. Her arm was painful and her feet were weary, but, as she passed out of the town and found herself on the bridge, she lost all thought of her bodily ills in the remembrance of the night when she had stood there with Richard at her side. The touch of the damp, cold mist upon her brow had seemed to her like an enchanter's wand, turning her life into gladness; but now the breath of sweet spring air that floated over the fields made her shiver as though an icy hand had been laid upon her. She dreaded meeting any of her acquaintances; but the road to the Manor was a lonely one, and she passed no one on the way. Her heart almost failed her when the house came in sight; but

she must not turn back now, and pushing open the gate she went slowly up the drive.

"Hylda!" exclaimed a voice behind her.

She looked back with a start and saw her mother coming towards her. Mrs. Carlyle had been sitting in her favourite summer-house, which commanded a view of the front gate and therefore gave her timely warning of her sister-in-law's visits.

"Come and sit down," she said, taking alarm at the sight of Hylda's white face. "What is the matter; you look ready to drop!"

"I have come home!" said Hylda, fixing her eyes on her mother with a strange look; "Richard has gone to Australia."

"To Australia!" said Mrs. Carlyle. "Has he gone on a lecturing tour?"

"No, he has left me," said Hylda in the same strained voice.

"My dear child, what do you mean?" said Mrs. Carlyle, turning upon her with a look of alarm. "You must not say such things, it is not right, and you really ought to have some consideration for me."

"I am sorry to be obliged to startle you," said Hylda, "but I have only told you the truth. I hardly understand how it has all come about, but Richard has had some share in the trouble at the time of the Bennington election, and it will all appear in the papers."

"That was a very sad business," said Mrs. Carlyle; "I never could understand it, so I did not try. However, if there is likely to be any disturbance it was very wise of Richard to go away for a time. But why did you not go with him?"

Hylda's heart sank; how was it possible to make her mother realise the position.

"He would not have taken me," she said; "it is a long, sad story, and I hardly know how to explain it to you, but if you will let me stay with you I shall be able to tell you all by degrees."

She looked wistfully at her mother, but Mrs. Carlyle would not meet her eyes.



"That would be rather awkward," she said; "it would make so much talk for you to be here; in fact, it would be quite impossible."

A terrible pang rushed through Hylda's heart. "Oh, mother!" she cried, "will you, too, cast me out?"

"It is not a question of *casting out*," said Mrs. Carlyle, peevishly; "you must see yourself that it would never do. It is most important that everything should be hushed up as far as possible, and for the servants to see you like this would set all kinds of tales afloat."

"Do you mean that you do not wish me to come into the house?"

"Well, dear, of course, I should never have said so, I should not have had the heart to! But since you see it yourself, I cannot help saying that I agree with you. If you go quietly home again, I feel sure that Richard will come back, and I shall be very pleased to come and stay with you meanwhile, if you will send me a proper invitation that I can show, if there should be any questions asked."

"I will go," said Hylda, and without another word she got up, and went to the door of the summer-house.

"I am so sorry not to be able to send you down to the station," said Mrs. Carlyle uneasily, as she watched her daughter's trembling steps," but, of course, if I had the carriage out the coachman would know you had been here—"

"Yes," said Hylda, wildly, "and if you offered me a cup of tea, Roberts would know I had been here. Good-bye, mother, it is better as it is."

"Hylda always had such an uncomfortable way of taking things," said Mrs. Carlyle to herself, as she settled down again in her corner. "Every woman has troubles in her married life, and it is very wicked to repine. I am sure that I was always patient with her dear father, in spite of all his faults!" and with a sigh of complacent resignation, she returned to her book.

It was Miss Elton's invariable custom to take a solitary walk on Wednesday afternoon; unless she had two hours of "silent fresh air" in the week, she felt that she could

not get on with her work, and she had so cultivated her powers of mental detachment that she was able to throw off her worries and give herself up to the healing influences of field and wood. She was coming back on this afternoon tired and muddy, but with her mind "cleared out," as she expressed it, when she saw a figure in front of her that she thought she recognised.

She turned and looked as she passed, intending to speak, but as she caught sight of Hylda's face, she gave a cry of alarm.

"Mrs. Weston, you are ill!" she said. "Let me help you."

Hylda had been struggling on in a dazed condition, one only thought filling her mind—that she must somehow manage to reach the station; but at the sound of help, her powers suddenly deserted her, and she sank to the ground.

Miss Elton was short, but she was sturdy, and what was better, she had plenty of presence of mind. She could not hold Hylda up, but she could break her fall, and having guided her to the ground, she rolled up her cloak and put it under her head, unfastened her collar, and fetched some water in the crown of her bonnet from a neighbouring spring, before most people would have had time to realise what had happened.

Hylda was not long in recovering consciousness, and she had no sooner opened her eyes than she tried to sit up.

"Wait a little," said Miss Elton. "You must not move yet."

"But I *must* go on," said Hylda feverishly, "I must get to the station."

Miss Elton began to suspect that something was really amiss, there was an anxiety in Hylda's eye and a wildness in her speech that alarmed her, but she did not lose her coolness of manner.

"I will fetch you a little more water," she said, "and then, if you are able, you shall go on."

She bathed her patient's brow and wetted her lips, and then putting her arm under her, helped her up.

Their progress was slow, and seeing how Hylda trembled

and shook, Miss Elton said resolutely as they neared the town, "You must come into my house to rest."

"No, no, I cannot," said Hylda, "no one must see me."

"No one shall see you," was the quiet rejoinder, "the girls and governesses are out, and I will take you in by the side door straight to my private sitting-room."

The schoolmistress was accustomed to dealing with refractory spirits, and her quiet tone and manner had their effect; perhaps, too, Hylda felt her own inability to go on, at any rate she made no further protest, and as soon as they were inside the friendly door, she let herself be laid on the sofa.

"Shall I send for Mrs. Carlyle?" said Miss Elton, who, in spite of her composure, was sorely puzzled what to do.

"Oh, no," cried Hylda, "she must not come to me; let me go!" and she tried to struggle to her feet.

"Very well, I will promise not to send for her," said Miss Elton, laying her back upon the cushions. "Now lie still, and I will make you some tea."

"A good deal of this is exhaustion," she said to herself, as she set about her preparations; "of course there is something at the back of it all, but I must attend to the bodily ailments first."

In this Miss Elton was right; Hylda had scarcely eaten any breakfast, and had tasted nothing since, while she had been through a terrible strain. She drank the hot tea eagerly and ate some biscuits, and as the warmth stole through her frame a more natural look came into her face.

"Can you sleep a little while now?" asked Miss Elton.

"Yes," said Hylda wearily, "but don't let anyone come in."

"No, you shall lock the door after me; I must go away for a little while, but I shall not be long."

It was a risk, but there was no alternative so far as she could see; she felt sure that something was seriously wrong and she could not take the responsibility of dealing with it alone, and if she might not fetch Mrs. Weston's mother, she must fetch her aunt.

Lady Carlyle was no more to Miss Elton than an awe-inspiring vision; she had seen her driving in state, and had heard many tales of her alarming manner. People spoke of her, however, in an entirely different way from that in which they spoke of her sister-in-law; they respected while they feared her, and though Miss Elton's heart sank at the idea of entering her presence, she had an instinctive confidence in her willingness to help. Without giving herself time to think she got into a fly and told the man to drive to Stowbury Court; what she would do when she got there she did not quite know, but at any rate the first step was clear.

"Can I see Lady Carlyle?" she asked of the solemn butler who opened the door.

The man paused for awhile before he answered. Miss Elton certainly did not look her best; her bonnet was damp and discoloured, and she had tied it on crooked in her hurry; she had no gloves, and her boots were covered with mud.

"Her ladyship has only just returned from driving," he said at last; "I do not think she can see you."

"But I must see her!" said Miss Elton desperately; "my business is most important."

The butler scarcely knew what to do; he would have thought that the visitor was a tramp, but that tramps do not usually arrive in a fly; his embarrassment was put an end to, however, by his satellite's remarking in an undertone, "Her ladyship is just going upstairs."

The unfortunate footman was silenced with a terrific frown; but Miss Elton had heard, and seizing her opportunity she darted into the hall and appeared before Lady Carlyle's astonished eyes.

"Something has happened to your niece," she said, going to the root of the matter at once.

She could not have acted more wisely; if she had begun with explanations and apologies she would not have been listened to, but as it was, Lady Carlyle grasped the situation at once, and turning to the discomfited butler she said severely, "Show this lady into the Blue Room."

"Here's a rum go!" remarked the footman when the door of the sanctum was closed.

"Will you have the goodness to keep your mouth shut, William?" said the butler, marching off to his private apartment in high dudgeon.

Miss Elton gave her bonnet a twitch as she sat down opposite her formidable companion, and tried to pull down her short skirts so as to hide the offending boots, but Lady Carlyle was not affected by such considerations as these; she knew the schoolmistress well by reputation, and was certain that there was some good cause for the liberty she was taking.

"You mentioned my niece!" she said in her dignified tone.

"I fear that Mrs. Weston is in great trouble," said Miss Elton, "and she forbids me to send for her mother."

"She shows her good sense there!" thought Lady Carlyle; but she made no reply, and her visitor went on with her tale.

"And now will you come to her?" she said when she had finished. "The fly is at the door, and I am anxious to get back as soon as possible, for she has been alone too long already."

"I will come, certainly," said Lady Carlyle, and they set off without delay.

The drive was a silent one; Miss Elton was filled with misgivings as to what might have befallen Hylda during her absence, while Lady Carlyle was thinking with even greater dread of the tale to which she might have to listen.

"I will go to her first," said Miss Elton; "I only hope she will not be angry at my having fetched you."

She need not have feared; Hylda had awakened from her sleep with quieted nerves, and the sight of her aunt restored her fainting courage with the assurance that there was someone who was not afraid to stand by her; she told her tale with more calmness than could have been expected a few hours before, and had soon made her listener acquainted with the main outlines of the story.

"And so your mother dreaded a scandal?" said Lady

Carlyle. "Well, you shall come to the Court, and we will see if people will dare to say anything then!"

"I cannot do that," said Hylda sadly.

"What do you mean?" said her aunt, a shade of her usual sternness coming back into her voice.

"It would not do for Richard to find me there when he returns," replied Hylda in a low tone.

There was silence for a moment, and then Lady Carlyle asked grimly, "Where do you propose to go, then?"

"Oh, do not think hardly of me!" cried Hylda, taking her aunt's hand between her own; "you have been so good, you have not said one unkind word, nor even reminded me of your warnings! I would give anything to be able to come to you; but it must not be."

She looked anxiously at the face beside her, so cold and unyielding in its expression; but while she looked, Lady Carlyle bent suddenly over the couch, and gathered her closely to her breast. Hylda's surprise was so great that she could not speak; never in all her life had she seen her aunt bestow such an embrace upon anyone, and that it should have been given to her in this hour of humiliation touched her to the quick.

There was a knock at the door at this moment, and Lady Carlyle started up in confusion; Hylda could have smiled at her shamefaced look if she had not felt her tears too near the surface, but she managed to control her voice when Miss Elton entered.

"I am much better now," she said; "I have been telling my aunt my troubles and she will help me; but I must go back to London this evening."

"But you are not fit for the journey," said Miss Elton, looking much disconcerted, for she had made up her mind that Lady Carlyle would take her niece back to the Court.

"Oh, yes, I am quite able to go," said Hylda, and feeling that it was not her part to object further, the good little woman hurried off to provide a suitable meal before the journey.

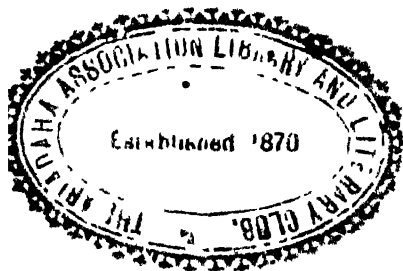
Nor did her ministrations end there; she kept herself in the background until Lady Carlyle had taken her departure, then, stilling the curiosity of her governesses as best she

might, she slipped out with Hylda and took her to the station.

"I can never thank you for all your kindness," said Hylda, as they stood on the platform; "it is one of those things that nothing can ever repay."

"I only wish I could go with you," said Miss Elton, "you don't look fit to travel alone."

She looked wistfully after the train as it moved off, and as the gleam of the lamp fell upon her battered bonnet, it seemed to Hylda that the face beneath it was as the face of an angel.



## CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. CARLYLE was at work in her conservatory two days after her daughter's sudden visit. The March sun was shining brilliantly, and, as she snipped off the dead leaves of her sweet-scented geraniums, she felt a peaceful sense of comfort and well-being.

She had had a momentary feeling of uneasiness that morning when the post brought her no letter from Hylda, but she had soon persuaded herself that no news was good news, and had found much consolation in reflecting upon her wisdom in refusing her ill-judged request. Mrs. Carlyle maintained, on principle, that there was no need to dwell on uncomfortable details. To gloss over a thing was, in her opinion, to remedy it; to conceal a wound was to cure it, and she was sure that if Hylda would only believe that there was nothing wrong, all would immediately be right.

In this complacent mood she had managed to forget all her worries, and when Roberts appeared with the announcement that Lady Carlyle was in the drawing-room, she went to greet her without a qualm.

"What a lovely day it is," she exclaimed as she pulled off her gardening gloves. "I could not think what had become of you; it is nearly a week since we met. I have been busy in the garden, or I should have been over to see you."

Lady Carlyle waited in perfect silence until Cecilia had run herself down.

"Do sit down, dear," went on Mrs. Carlyle. "I want to show you my new ferns; but you must rest first."



"I have not time to sit down," said Lady Carlyle. "I am on my way from the station, and I must drive on to the Court directly. Cecilia, I have been to see your unhappy child!"

Cecilia gave a start; she saw that something was coming, but she made an attempt to stave it off.

"I have not seen you to tell you that Hylda paid me a flying visit on Wednesday," she said. "She was not looking very well, but I did not think it anything serious."

"No, you did not think!" returned her sister-in-law. "I am not surprised at that; but your thoughtlessness might have cost Hylda her life. You let her go weary and exhausted from your door, and if a good Samaritan had not found her, she might have died by the wayside."

"Someone met her!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlyle, passing over the rest of the sentence. "I hoped she would have got away without being seen. Who was it?"

"Someone with a softer heart than yours!" said Lady Carlyle. "She took the poor child in and fed and warmed her, and then came to fetch me. I need not tell you all the details, as you do not seem to be particularly interested in your daughter; but I followed her to London yesterday, to see if I could help her."

"You have no right to speak to me in that way," cried Cecilia, dropping her gloves and scissors in a heap upon the floor as she nervously wrung her hands. "I only did what I felt was for the best. Hylda is so impulsive, she never stops to think of consequences. I pointed out to her how important it was not to give people an opportunity of gossiping, and she saw it herself, and quite agreed with me."

"Well, you have over-reached yourself this time," said Harriet, with grim satisfaction. "Hylda agreed with you in the same way that a dog agrees to leave your house if you kick it out of doors; but that may not prevent it from dying in a ditch outside all the same!"

"But who was it who found her?" said Mrs. Carlyle, returning to the charge. "You have not told me that yet. Fancy what it will be for me, if all Stowbury talks about me as an unnatural mother!"

"You need not be afraid of that," said Lady Carlyle, sardonically. "Truth never spreads so easily as falsehood!"

Cecilia did not see the satire, but she accepted the consolation.

"Poor dear Hylda, I will go to her at once," she said, for now that she felt less anxiety on her own score she had leisure to think about her daughter. "I might even tell the servants that I have heard she is unwell, and start this afternoon!"

"You might; but I am afraid you could hardly reach Yarmouth to-day."

"Yarmouth?" cried Mrs. Carlyle, in consternation. "Do you mean that Hylda has gone to those dreadful people?"

"She has gone to her husband's relations, if that is what you mean."

"But why did you let her go; what could you have been thinking of?"

"There was nothing else to be done; she came to your door seeking shelter, and you turned her away. I talked over the matter thoroughly with her, and we came to the conclusion that she must go to Yarmouth."

"Then there is nothing I can do?"

"Nothing, except to go back to your geraniums."

Lady Carlyle had got her knife out, and she did not scruple to use it; but as she dealt her last thrust, her sister-in-law turned away with a pale face and trembling hands. Selfish and superficial as she was, she was not a bad-hearted woman, and having once realised her daughter's trouble, her conscience was beginning to smite her.

Lady Carlyle looked at her for a moment, then going up to her she laid her hand on her arm.

"Cecilia," she said, "perhaps I have been too hard on you; if so, you must forgive me. I could not help being indignant when I saw that poor child's condition; but we must hold together if we can; there are troubles enough ahead; God knows!"

Her stern voice shook as she uttered the last words, and

Cecilia looked at her in amazement. Harriet with tears in her eyes? Harriet with a request for pardon on her lips? It was something so new that it terrified her far more than all the preceding reproaches, and clasping her hands together she besought to be told the worst.

Lady Carlyle's last shade of resentment vanished at the sight of her distress, and with a softer feeling towards her than she had ever before experienced, she led her to a seat, and explained fully what it was that had happened. Cecilia's regret for the past was so keen now that it had once been awakened that she could hardly take in the details of the story; but before they parted, she had promised faithfully to be guided by her sister-in-law's advice for the future.

Much as Lady Carlyle told her, however, there was one point on which she kept silence. She would have grudged no exertions of her own on Hylda's behalf, but it was another matter when her son took up the cause. Her first words with Tristram had shown her that he knew all. Mr. Dudley-Hartnell had been in close conference with him, and he could supply several details of which she was in ignorance. With most of what he said she was in full accord, but his last sentence fairly astonished her.

"If only I had seen Weston before he went, I could have told him that I had no thought of revenge. He has been punished quite enough without being made a scape-goat of. But it is too late, he has gone; so I have made up my mind to go after him."

It was some time before Lady Carlyle could recover herself enough to speak, and when she did so, it was with a vexation that fully equalled her surprise.

"If you do that, Tristram," she said, "you will be doing a very foolish thing. If there were no other reason against it, you would be throwing away your chance of a seat. After this affair, you are sure to get in at the first opportunity; but if you leave the country it is certain to have a bad effect. Perhaps you have not thought of this?"

"I have had every chance of doing so, at any rate," said Tristram. "Poor Rhodes was with me to-day, in a

perfectly frantic condition. I never liked the man so well before; he is ready to cut his tongue out for having malign'd me, and if I had not prevented him, he would have applied for the Chiltern Hundreds to-morrow."

"And why did you prevent him? It would have been the best thing he could have done."

"It did not seem so to me," said Tristram, quietly. "It was a mistake and not malice, and he has no right to plunge the constituency into another contest to satisfy his private sense of remorse."

"But you ought not to be left under a cloud!"

"Those whose opinion I care for have never looked upon me as under a cloud; and as for the general public, the newspapers which misled it may put it right again. However, he would not be held back from making a confession at Bennington."

"I am glad of that. But all this does not show me why you should set off on the chase of which you spoke. Everybody will be wondering over it, and—I hardly like to say it, even to you—but is it well that your name should be mixed up any further with the story?"

"I cannot help knowing what you mean," said Tristram; "but it is a subject which must never be discussed between us. You need not be afraid, no one will know what my real object is in going. After my late illness, it can be matter for no remark that I should go for a voyage; and if I should bring Weston back with me, it ought to shut all mouths for ever. Don't try to hinder me, mother," he added, in a lower tone; "there is no hope of happiness for me unless it be in giving happiness to her."

Lady Carlyle felt grieved and discontented in spite of all his arguments. He seemed to her to be Quixotic in his notions, and, moreover, she could not satisfy herself that he was acting prudently.

"We shall see what Hylda thinks of it," she remarked.

"No, we shall not," said Tristram decisively; "she will know nothing of it; she has quite enough to bear without having this added suspense."

Lady Carlyle's private opinion was that no one had had so much to bear in the matter as her son; but she knew

that he would not thank her for telling him so, and therefore she said nothing.

If she could have seen her niece that night, however, she might have altered her views.

It was late when Hylda arrived at Yarmouth, for Easter was near and the trains were crowded; she was weary and worn in mind and body, and though she had written to announce her coming, she had a nervous fear that the letter might have been delayed, and that she was not expected. In this fear she was confirmed when she reached Yarmouth, for there was no familiar face upon the platform; but she could not go back again, and having secured her luggage she set off to the house. If she received a second rebuff she should be in despair, for she could not stay alone at Beryl Villa, nor would it satisfy Richard's suspicions for any of her own people to be with her.

The servant who opened the door expressed no surprise at seeing her, however, and she was shown upstairs to a room whence the sound of loud voices met her ear; a family tempest was evidently blowing, and her heart beat apprehensively.

Her entrance was hardly noticed for the moment, and her eye travelled quickly from one member to another of the excited group. Mr. Weston stood on the hearthrug; his hand clenched and his face purple with rage; Mrs. Weston sat on the sofa, her comfortable form convulsed with sobs, and tears raining down her ample cheeks; Jo was sitting perched on a table, savagely biting the nails of one hand, while he beat a defiant tattoo with the other; Ellen and Ralph Rhodes stood together in the centre of the room, his face white and set, while she looked at him with an expression in which grief and pride strove together. Flo alone seemed to be taking no share in the fray; she stood apart by the window, and kept her face turned away from the rest.

Jo was the first to perceive that a new comer had appeared on the scene. He jumped off the table, and came to meet her with an effusive welcome.

"Here, come to mother!" he said; "you do look bad, and it's not much wonder!"

He led her to the sofa, and Mrs. Weston clasped her in a damp embrace, rocking to and fro the while and uttering incoherent words of affection and woe.

"There, look at that poor thing!" exclaimed Mr. Weston, pointing an emphatic finger at his daughter-in-law. "Completely crushed! Can you look at such a sight as that and persist in your inhuman folly?"

"Hylda would be the first to bid me go on," replied Ralph.

"Nonsense, sir!" thundered the old man. "Hylda is not such a fool. I can only tell you this—unless you do as I wish my daughter shall never marry you."

"Will you give me up?" said Ralph, turning to Ellen.

"Never!" said Ellen.

"So you defy me to my face, do you?" cried Mr. Weston, scowling at his daughter as he rushed off upon a new tack. "Well, if you choose to be a beggar, you can. Not a halfpenny shall you ever get from me, and come what may you shall never darken my door again!"

Hylda had extricated herself from Mrs. Weston's arms by this time, and sat in utter bewilderment amid the turmoil.

"I must go," said Ralph, as the clock struck, "I have only just time to catch my train."

"And you really mean to hold this meeting at Bennington?"

"Yes."

"Very well, say good-bye to Ellen here and now."

"That I cannot do!"

Hylda's brain began to reel with fatigue and confusion; the storm of angry voices, impassioned sobs, and stamping feet, grew louder and louder; she closed her eyes wearily, but opened them again in terror, imagining that Mr. Weston had hurled Ralph to the ground. It was only the slamming of the door, however. Ralph had gone, Jo was tearing after him with a parting expostulation, Ellen was hurrying to the window to catch a last glimpse, Mrs. Weston was beginning to dry her eyes, and her husband took out his red silk handkerchief and wiped the drops from his forehead.

Flo took advantage of the pause to come up to Hylda.

"Shall I take you to your room?" she said, "your must be quite worn out."

"Yes, take her away," said Mrs. Weston; "she's a poor martyred dear, and I don't wonder that that heartless villain hadn't the face to look at her."

"Mother," said Ellen, turning round from the window, "you must not speak of Ralph like that; he is only doing what he believes to be right."

The storm was evidently coming up again, and without waiting for more, Flo drew Hylda out of the room and took her upstairs.

"What is it all about?" asked Hylda, as soon as they were alone.

Flo did not answer at once; she helped Hylda to take off her things and settled her upon the sofa, then sitting down, on the floor beside her, she hid her face in her hands.

"Tell me," said Hylda, unable to restrain her anxiety.

"It is about Ralph," said Flo, looking up; "he saw Sir Tristram Carlyle yesterday, and told him that he should declare the truth publicly. He came here to-day to tell my father and Ellen, and you saw how he was received."

She hid her face again, and Hylda waited in sickening suspense; there was much to hear yet.

"You see," she went on at last, "they all believe in Richard still."

"And you?" asked Hylda. The words were no more than a whisper, but Flo heard them and shivered.

"I cannot!" she said hoarsely.

There was silence for some minutes, then looking at Hylda with an expression of agony she added, "And it is all my fault!"

"No, no, you must not say that!" cried Hylda. "We have all been to blame in one way and another. It is a terrible story."

Again there was silence, from which Flo roused herself with an effort.

"I must tell you the rest," she said. "Father thinks that it is all a newspaper lie, and that Ralph is going blindfold

into a trap that has been laid for him; mother would never believe a word against Richard whatever happened, and she has done nothing but cry since we first heard it, while Jo says that he doesn't care a rap what anybody says, he is going to stand for his brother through thick and thin."

"And Ellen?"

"I hardly know what Ellen thinks. She is more inclined to blame Richard than any of the others, but I expect it is only because she is determined to uphold Ralph."

Hylda sighed; to hope for rest in such a strife as this was something like sitting down on a hornets' nest and hoping for ease!

"Perhaps I shall make things worse if I stay?" she said at last.

"Oh no, you must stay!" cried Flo; "I cannot do without you."

Hylda had never imagined that she would live to be thankful for Flo's friendship, but in that moment of desolation the feeling that anyone wanted her seemed to break the ice about her heart.

"There is no one but you who can understand me, just now," went on Flo. "I dare not tell them what I really feel; it would only make another disturbance. There is no fear of anything unpleasant being said to you, they are all ready to make a martyr of you, as you saw just now."

"But what am I to do?"

"Oh, you must just hold your peace. After all, neither you nor I can proclaim Richard's guilt for him; he must do that himself."

"He will never do that!" said Hylda, sadly.

"Don't give up in that way. They have all written him the most loving letters, telling him that they quite understand his wishing to get out of the way of the trouble, but that whatever may be said nothing will ever alter their faith in him. I am certain that he will come back, if only to clear Ralph, for father has told him that Ralph shall be banished for ever as a punishment."

Flo's account of the situation was a correct one, and Hylda found no relief for her overstrained nerves in the days that followed, for there were continual disputes,



varied by bursts of grief from one or other of the party. Their belief in Richard, if she could have shared it, would have seemed to her beautiful in the extreme; but as it was, each expression of it was only a cruel pang. She could not even share Flo's and Hylda's fuller knowledge of Richard's character, and the hope; but so long as there was a chance at his acquaintance, separation she felt that he ought to have the benefit of.

Her only comfort was in her conversations with Ellen, who evinced a depth of sympathy and an amount of understanding that were almost incredible. Shaken out of the life in which she had lived so long, with her admirations forgotten and her fashions neglected, she was a different person, and Hylda found some faint consolation in the fact. With Ellen her relations were not nearly so agreeable, for much as she had at first preferred her elder sister-in-law, there was an insurmountable barrier between them now.

Ralph Rhodes had been as good as his word, and had told his constituents the true state of the case amid counterblasts of groans and cheers; but, while he freely confessed his own mistake, he said nothing of Richard's guilt, and Ellen might well be excused for loving and admiring him more than ever. And yet, though she agreed with all he said and did, his views were more in accordance with those of Flo and Hylda than with hers; for, in spite of all, she persisted in disbelieving that her brother had done more than share in a mistake. They had no chance of disputing over it, for they were not allowed to meet, but the difference of opinion between her lover and herself was a very bitter drop in Ellen's cup. The preparations for her wedding had all been laid aside in obedience to her father's command, for though she would not give up her engagement, she would not marry in defiance of his wishes. She could not go back to her charitable works in her present state of suspense and despair, and so she was reduced to wandering about in a miserable solitude, that Hylda pitied, but could do nothing to remedy.

Things were in this state when one day Jo exclaimed loudly over the morning paper.

"So he's off, too!" he said.

"Who is off?" asked his father.

Jo read out the paragraph: "Sir Tristram Carlyle, who has been in an unfavourable state of health since his late illness, embarked yesterday for a voyage round the world. A number of friends were present to see him off, and expressed their hopes that he would return completely restored."

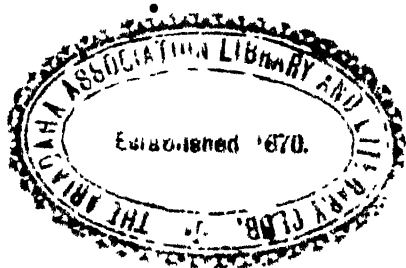
"If he had gone a few months ago, all this might have been saved," said Mrs. Weston, regretfully.

"I always said he was at the bottom of the mischief," remarked her husband, "and his skulking off in this way just proves it. That rascal Rhodes will go next, mark my words!"

Ellen clenched her hands tightly together, but she said nothing; she had schooled herself to silence, though not to patience.

"I'm glad he has gone," said Jo. "One villain less makes the air clearer to breathe."

Hylda had realised long ago that Richard's family had quite lost sight of the fact of her having been a Carlyle in the far more important one of her having become a Weston. She was not surprised at the frankness of their remarks, therefore; but, in any case, she would hardly have heeded them. Let them think what they liked, her whole being was absorbed in one conviction that impressed itself more strongly upon her with every moment; the motive of Tristram's journey was as plain to her as though he had told her of it with his own lips: whatever reasons or explanations might be given to the world, she knew that he had gone to seek Richard!



## CHAPTER XXIII.

It was a fine afternoon in May. The autumn wind blew freshly and the sun shone brilliantly from a clear sky. The city of Melbourne was looking its gayest, and a throng of loungers paraded up and down Collins Street in all the glory of fashionable costumes, gossiping, laughing, greeting their acquaintances, and gazing into the shop-windows.

A young man came along the flagged footway just as the promenade reached its most crowded time, but though there was something in his appearance that marked him out as a stranger, he paid but little heed to his surroundings, threading his way quickly through the jostling groups of people, and passing indifferently by the most dazzling apparitions of Melbourne beauty. It was only when he turned into Spring Street that his interest seemed to be aroused, and as soon as he reached the Treasury Buildings he turned in and found his way to the Police Department.

Although Tristram had set out from England with the full determination to find Richard Weston before he returned, he knew that such a task would be a hopeless one if he attempted it alone. Happily, he was independent of money considerations, and was therefore able to engage the detective who had already been employed on the case, and who travelled with him in the guise of his servant. They had followed up their man as far as Melbourne, but here all trace of him was lost, and though a fortnight had passed since they had first communicated with the local authorities, nothing had yet been heard.

Tristram's health had improved wonderfully on the voyage, and the new sensation of adventure acted like a

powerful tonic on his frame. He felt ready for any amount of fatigue and excitement, and his interest in the novel scenes around him increased every day. Even the sadness of his quest could not hinder his spirits from rising, and the hidden longing for a wild freedom that lingers in most men's breasts had asserted itself in contradiction to the habits of a lifetime, and taken full possession of him. He looked alert and eager as he entered the Police Department on this afternoon, his face was sunburnt; his eyes were bright, and his friends at home would scarcely have recognised him.

"I have some news for you at last," said the inspector, as he looked up from his desk.

"Well done!" exclaimed Tristram. "Where is he?"

"He is not here at all."

"So much the better," said Tristram, visions of an exciting up-country chase, of desperate gold-diggers and ruffianly bush-rangers flitting before him as though he had been a schoolboy. "Only let me know where he is, and I will start to-night."

"You can't start to-night," said the inspector, stolidly, "there's no vessel."

"No vessel? Has he gone along the coast, then?"

"No, he has gone home again."

Tristram looked at him in dismay; was there ever a flatter and more disappointing ending? He had pictured himself in many dramatic scenes, dragging Richard out from a bush fire, saving him from the attacks of assassins, rescuing him in some lonely hut from the clutches of a deadly fever! To be defrauded of such a climax was bad enough, but to return absolutely empty-handed was worse still. By the time he reached England, the man he had been in search of would be safe at home again, and his wild-goose errand would be a matter of mirth to all who heard of it.

He ground his teeth savagely, and the inspector might well be excused for mistaking his feelings.

"Yes, he's escaped for this time," he said. "But never mind, you'll get him yet. I've known men save up a revenge for years, and find it all the better for keeping in the end."

"What made him start off again, do you think?" asked Tristram, without entering upon a discussion of his motives.

"Well, I should fancy that he got wind of your being here. If you remember, your arrival was mentioned in the papers."

"I wish the papers would leave things alone," said Tristram, thinking with some bitterness of the part they had played in his career.

"There wouldn't be much reading in them if they did," returned the inspector.

"You can't tell me what he is likely to do next, I suppose?" asked Tristram.

"Well, that is a matter of guesswork; but still, a guess will do no harm. He took his passage for England, but, from all you have told me I should doubt his going there yet awhile. If I were you, I would cable instructions to the authorities at Brindisi."

"Thank you," said Tristram, "I will follow your advice."

He took his departure with a sense of disappointment that he found it in vain to combat. All the spirit seemed to have been taken out of his enterprise, and he went back with lagging feet to communicate the result of his enquiries.

Tanner, the detective, was an enthusiast in his work, and cared no more for its surroundings than a fox-terrier cares for the beauty of the scenery in which he catches his rats. The search was everything to him, and the place in which it was carried on was a matter of complete indifference. His one idea was to get off without delay, and in the end he succeeded in infecting his employer with his eagerness, so that Tristram saw the land of his desire fading from his sight with less regret than he had anticipated. The forced inaction of the voyage was a sore trial to him, but before it was over he had taken himself to task for his selfishness: how could he have lost sight of the advantage to Hylda in Richard's speedy return? Was he a boy, that he should be intoxicated with his first taste of liberty? He ought to be rejoicing that Richard's heart

had so quickly turned towards home, instead of mourning over the fact that he was not to be allowed the triumph of bringing back the wanderer.

By the time they arrived at Brindisi, he had succeeded in getting himself under control again, and when after prolonged enquiries news of Richard was heard from Turin, he set off with renewed zest. His plans had, however, undergone one important alteration; up to the present time, he had intended to seek Richard out, assure him of his pardon, promise to do all he could to help him on his return, and lead him back to the wife whom he had deserted. But his solitary meditations on board ship had resulted in a change in the scheme, a change that consisted in no less than striking out his own part in the play. Richard's departure from Australia seemed to show that he was repenting of his own accord. He would do nothing more than watch him, and as soon as he saw that his face was really set homewards, he would go quietly on his way and leave him to make his entry alone.

With much expenditure of time and labour, the trackers followed their quarry from Turin to Zurich, from Zurich to Strasbourg, from Strasbourg to Frankfort, and from Frankfort to Namur. Here for a time they were foiled, and Tristram began to look very anxiously for his English letters, expecting by every mail to hear of Richard's arrival.

"I believe I have found a clue," said Tanner, coming into the sitting-room of the Namur Hotel one morning. "I have just heard something from Brussels."

"From Brussels! Are you sure you are not mistaken?" said Tristram.

He had so completely convinced himself by this time that Richard was in England that he could hardly admit the possibility of his being close at hand after all.

"This is the letter," said Tanner. "It says that an Englishman, whose only mark of identification was a W. on some of his clothes, was carried into the hospital at Brussels a week or two ago. If we go over, we shall have a good chance of finding him without his being able to escape us."

"We will go at once," said Tristram; "we are doing no good here, anyway."

A few hours later the two men stood in the vestibule of the hospital interviewing a white-capped nurse. She could not recall the man of whom Monsieur spoke, but he could ask for a sight of the books of admission, or would he please to walk through the wards?

Tristram chose the latter alternative; he could not tell under what name or description Richard might have been entered in the hospital books, but however altered by illness he had no doubt of recognising him. No success attended their search, however, and a careful examination of the porter only resulted in the fact that a man, believed to be an Englishman, had been brought in by two gendarmes, insensible from a fall in the streets; he had refused to give any account of himself, and as soon as he was well enough he had been discharged. There was nothing in all this that might not have applied to Richard, but on the other hand, it would have applied equally well to a hundred others; the W. upon his clothes would stand for many names beside Weston, and after all, even if it should be Richard himself, they were no nearer finding him than they had been before.

Tanner, on the contrary, refused to take a hopeless view. In default of contradictory evidence, he chose to believe that the discharged patient was the man they sought, and granting this, the chances were in favour of his remaining in the City for the present. He could speak French fluently, and he spent his time interviewing innumerable officials high and low, and when this produced no result, he commenced a series of visits to all the *estaminets* he could discover, a task of no small magnitude, considering that the bibulous little city contains upwards of two thousand.

Tristram took but little part in the search, for he still believed that Richard had returned to England, but until news of him arrived, he might as well spend his time in Brussels as anywhere else, and he alternated between the dim aisles of St. Gudule and the cool shades of the Bois.

He was walking down the Avenue Louise one autumn evening on his way back to his hotel; the day had been

wet, a chill, damp greyneſs hanging over air and ſky, but now it was clearing up into a kind of reluctant beauty, and he felt inclined to extend his walk. He turned to the left, as he came down the Avenue, and walked along the Rue Defacqz; it was a part of the city into which he had never before penetrated, and he looked round him with ſome curioſity. His way led paſt the priſon, whoſe huge grey walls frowned threateningly upon him; but ſoon he found glimpses of open country breaking upon his view, the ſtreets were exchanged for ſoft, ſandy roads, and in a few minutes more he was at the entrance to the little Parc which is known by the name of St. Gilles.

At firſt ſight the place had not much to recommend it; clumps of ſmall trees and high bare mounds ſtudded with wooden ſeats, this was all. And yet it poſſeſſed one charm which ſome of its more beautiful rivals lacked; it commanded a magnificent view of the ſunſet. Tristram forgot all elſe as he beheld the glorious pageant ſpread out before his gaze; ſtorm clouds ſtill floated over the ſky, and a chilly breeze ſhook the drops from the boughs, but far away in the weſt the ſetting ſun ſteamed out, tinting the clouds with ever-changing colours, and lighting up every raindrop with glittering radiance. The ſtretch of country which lay beneath loſt all its inſignificant details in the glory that illuminated it; it ſeemed like ſome dream land where human care and ſadneſs could never penetrate, and Tristram gazed entranced as though its very ſight could reſtore peace to his heart.

The ſound of an approaching footſtep roused him, and turning, he found himſelf face to face with Richard Weſton.

So at leaſt his firſt glance aſſured him, but as he looked again he drew back, believing himſelf miſtaken; the gauntness of the figure, the deadneſs of the eyes, the ſhabbiſneſs of the clothes, were all ſo unlike the man whom he remembered, that it ſeemed to him impoſſible that he ſaw aright. But as he looked in bewilderment, a change went over the pallid face before him, the eyes dilated with a fierce light, the ſtooping ſhoulders ſquared, and the ſpirit of Richard Weſton paſſed into the waſted and miſerable form.



"What do you want of me?" he asked, trying to speak in his old masterful manner.

"Nothing," said Tristram.

"Then why have you dared to dog my steps?"

"Because I thought that you could scarcely have recovered from the effects of your accident when you left the hospital," said Tristram, venturing a guess in the dark.

His words seemed to recall Richard from his brief transformation; he shrank together again, and the fire died out of his eyes.

"I shall soon be all right," he said sullenly, without showing any surprise at Tristram's knowledge.

"Not unless you have proper advice," said Tristram, seizing the opportunity. "I should like Dr. Beauville to see you, he has a great reputation here."

He spoke carelessly, concealing his anxiety; but Richard muttered something about expense, and began to move away.

"The expense is nothing," said Tristram, "he comes every day to the hotel where I am staying. You may as well come back with me now."

He waited for no reply, but walked on by his side, and though Richard looked about him uneasily, he made no actual effort at escape.

But when they reached the street and Tristram signed to the driver of an empty carriage, he came to a full stop.

"Thank you," he said; "it is very good of you, but I must go now."

"Get in," said Tristram, "you are not fit to walk."

"It's all very well," said Richard, waving the other's hand aside, "I am not going to walk into any trap."

Tristram looked him full in the face. "This is no trap, Weston," he said; "if I had found you before you left England you would have had no need to fly at all. I will not say that I forgive you, because I have no quarrel against you; all I want is to see you in good hands. Get in, and you can tell me your symptoms by the way."

Tristram's tone was convincing, but his success was not so much due to that as to Richard's physical distress; the

thought of possible relief for his sufferings took hold of his mind with a strength that he could not resist, and he made no further effort to refuse the tempting offer. He allowed himself to be helped into the carriage, and began an incoherent account of his case, but long before they reached the hotel his powers deserted him, and his voice was lost in a hollow cough alternating in a groan as he pressed his hand against his chest.

"See that a room is prepared for this gentleman, Tanner," said Tristram, as they encountered the detective on the steps of the hotel.

Tanner checked the exclamation that rose to his lips with some difficulty, but triumphant as he felt, his exultation was somewhat dashed by the discovery that Richard was to be treated as a guest and not as a prisoner, and that far from exercising authority over him, he was required to wait upon him! But Tanner was a kind-hearted fellow at bottom, and it was wonderful how soon he managed to forget the detective in the sick nurse.

Tristram would not enter upon any exciting subjects until the doctor had paid his visit, but he had no difficulty in staving off conversation. From the moment that Richard was placed in bed he seemed to collapse altogether, and only roused himself from the half slumber in which he lay to take the food and wine that Tanner administered.

"There is no reason why he should not recover," was the doctor's verdict, when he had made his examination; "but it must be understood he will need great care. There is an injury to the lung, which has been aggravated by privation; for example, he has not had enough to eat!"

"Is there any reason why he should not be taken to England?"

"No; that is to say, when he is stronger; he must not be moved at present."

It was several days before Richard was able to get up, but the effects of good food, good medicine, and good nursing showed themselves at last, and he began to gain strength. The long-desired event was, however, disappointing when it came; instead of showing gratitude for all

that had been done for him, Richard was perfectly sullen, and seemed to think of nothing but how soon he could escape. Tristram had hard work sometimes not to lose his temper, and he wondered more than once whether all his trouble had not been in vain.

He thought that his efforts were unnoticed, but his patient was more discerning than he believed, and one day, when he had repaid an extra amount of sullenness with an extra amount of kindness, Richard suddenly seized his hand.

"Carlyle," he said, "I am a brute!"

"Nonsense," said Tristram, "sick men are privileged beings."

"Ah! but that isn't all," said Richard; "it's the past I'm thinking of, as well as the present. I've just been reading a letter; I wouldn't open it before, though I had it a long while ago."

He paused, and Tristram could not resist the question that rose to his lips.

"Was it from Hylda?" he asked.

"No, it was not. I threw her letter overboard at once. I've destroyed her love for me, and all is at an end between us. It was from my mother."

Tristram felt too pained to speak at first, but gathering himself together with an effort, he asked:

"Have you written to your mother?"

"Not yet; I may write, perhaps, some time or other."

He turned over, and would say no more; but, by and by, he went back to the subject of his own accord.

"My mother would love me just the same, whatever I did," he began suddenly. "*She* would not be always judging me by an impossible standard, and comparing me with other people to my disadvantage."

Tristram guessed that this was an accusation against Hylda, but he said nothing, and after a pause Richard spoke again.

"You never gambled, Carlyle," he said; "that was all a lie. But I made a plunge into gambling, and into plenty of other things, too, after I grew desperate. I hadn't a sou left when I got to Brussels; I was mad with hunger, but

though no one would give me bread, I found someone to give me drink. That was how I was knocked down in the street."

"But how did you live after you came out of the hospital?"

"Don't ask me. I was reckless, *mad*, and I am still."

"But you love your mother?" suggested Tristram, touching on the one string that had power to rouse his softer mood.

"Yes," he said, his face changing, "I love them all at home, even Ellen, though she did say that she could never forgive me for my treatment of Rhodes."

"You read her letter, then?" said Tristram.

"Yes, I have read everybody's letters."

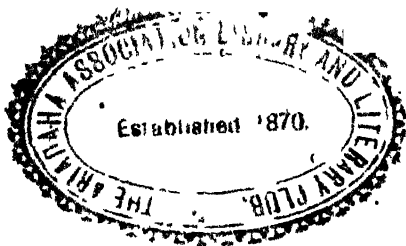
Hylde, then, counted as nobody, and Tristram sighed heavily; it seemed as if even now his quest was to be in vain.

A few days after this Richard was allowed to change his room, and on going in to visit him, Tristram found him writing busily.

"There, that's done!" he said, putting his letter into an envelope and sealing it down. "Will you post it for me, if you are going out? I've written to my mother, and made a clean breast of everything. I told her that I am coming home next Monday. I asked Beauville, and he says I can travel all right. I said that you were the best fellow in the world," he added, in a conventional tone, "and that I could never repay your kindness. Of course, my father will repay any expense to which you may have been put."

Tristram took the letter, and went off without replying.

"I might just as well have let the whole thing alone!" he thought bitterly, as he dropped the letter into the post-box, and went on his way with an unbearable feeling of disappointment at his heart.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

FIVE months had passed away since Hylda's arrival at Yarmouth, and each week had seemed a year. Richard's silence and the uncongenial nature of her surroundings had dragged the hours with leaden weights, and whichever way she looked she saw no gleam of hope.

Mrs. Carlyle would gladly now have had her daughter with her, but Hylda felt that to go would be to break her last tie with her husband, and she bore patiently with all the trials of her position.

Tristram had sent a message through Mr. Dudley-Hartnell that Richard was in Brussels with friends, and this news had caused much rejoicing; but whether he wrote or whether he did not, his relations believed in him still, and they had made up their minds that he was waiting to prepare some crushing rejoinder for his enemies.

The arrival of his letter, however, caused a sudden change in their ideas.

It came at breakfast-time one Saturday morning, and with an hysterical cry of "Dick!" Mrs. Weston tore it open, and began to read aloud.

"Dearest Mother,

"I know you will all have been in wild alarm all this time, thinking I am lost, drowned or dead! But the truth is that I have felt ashamed to write, for of course you have long ago found out that the Bennington business was my doing. There is no need to enter into it all now; it was a shame to gull poor old Rhodes, and I don't know whether Ellen will ever forgive me. I went pretty nearly mad what with one thing and another, and I should not care to tell

you of all the pits I've fallen into since I left. But the long and short of it is that I am ill, and Carlyle has been nursing me. He is a trump, and I know my father will pay him his out-of-pocket expenses, for I shouldn't care to be beholden to him. I am well enough to travel now, and hope to arrive at Dover at 8 p.m. on Monday. Please send someone down to meet me.

"With love to all,

"Your loving son,

"DICK."

Hylda's heart sank lower and lower as she heard no mention of her name. Her position was trying enough already; but if Richard were to return to his home, and finding her there ignore her, what course could she possibly adopt? Her thoughts were diverted from herself, however, by an unexpected remark from her father-in-law.

"I never heard anything so impudent in my life!"

"So imprudent?" said Mrs. Weston, misunderstanding him in her agitation. "The doctor surely would not let him come if there was any risk!"

"I said *impudent*!" thundered Mr. Weston, glaring at his wife. "Dick always was a mass of impudence, and I've humoured him too long. He has disgraced his name, wasted his money, and run into all sorts of folly, and now he expects me to help him. He may expect, that's all I can say!"

"But you will not refuse his coming home?" implored Mrs. Weston, who was too much upset to have any discretion left.

"Of course I shall!" said her husband, goaded, as usual, into obstinacy by the first hint of opposition. "He may go where he likes and do what he can; I shan't trouble my head about him."

"Oh, father!" cried Flo, "how can you be so hard? I have known it was true all the time, but I have never turned against Dick!"

"Known it was true! What do you mean?"

"I knew Dick had made that plot—I guessed—Hylda told me," faltered Flo, getting further and further into a quagmire.

"Then you have been here all this time on false pretences?" said Mr. Weston, darting a furious glance at his daughter-in-law. "You knew your husband was a villain, and yet you came cringing here, eating our bread and sponging on us——"

"Oh, don't talk like that!" interposed Mrs. Weston. "I never liked to tell you, because you get so angry with me about things, but Hylda's been paying for her board all the time she's been here. I've told her times and times that she needn't, but she wouldn't listen to me."

"So you thought I was a skinflint, did you?" said Mr. Weston, taking up a fresh line of attack. "I don't grudge anything to anybody; I'm as open-handed a man as ever lived; but support thieves and villains I won't, and there's an end of it."

The surprise of this sudden assault almost took Hylda's breath away. Since her arrival at Yarmouth she had been treated with such affection that the sudden change was bewildering. It was true that the affection had often been a trial, knowing, as she did, the delusion under which they laboured, but it was cruel to have her loyalty to her husband flung in her face as a crime.

"I left it to Richard to make his own confession," she said, "and you see that my hope was justified. Now that he has owned his fault is surely not the time to desert him. I hope that you will change your mind, but, if not, I shall meet him at Dover, and make some arrangement for him myself."

"You can do so, of course, if you like," said Mr. Weston, with a sneer, "but I daresay you notice that he implies that he doesn't want you!"

Hylda turned deadly pale at the taunt, so pale that Flo thought she was going to faint, and rushed to her side.

"I don't care what you say, father," she exclaimed, indignantly, "I shall go with Hylda."

"A nice dutiful lot of children I've got!" remarked Mr. Weston. "First Ellen kicks over the traces, then Dick deserts us, and now it's Flo. There's no one left but Jo."

Jo had been feeling some silent compunction at the sight

of Hylda's distress, but at these words he checked his rising sympathy. An allowance of fifty pounds a year does not admit of surreptitious horse hire and continual dissipation in billiard-rooms, and Jo had been quaking for some time at the thought of what would befall him if his debts came to his father's ears. But this unexpected canonisation of himself as a dutiful child seemed to open up a new vista of hope, and he accepted it silently. To side with the unfortunate is, after all, a luxury; and with a virtuous feeling of self-denial, he came to the conclusion that for the present it was a luxury he could not afford.

The storm was still raging when Hylda and Flo set off on their journey, and for the moment Hylda was thankful to have escaped it, even though she knew that worse troubles might lie before her. But by the time they stood upon the Dover pier she felt sick with apprehension, and as the Ostend boat came in sight, she longed to turn and fly while there was yet time.

"There he is, Hylda!" cried Flo as the steamer approached. "Don't you see him? The one wrapped up in a plaid; how ill he looks! I wonder who that is with him."

Hylda had seen them long before her sister-in-law had done so, but her tongue was cleaving to the roof of her mouth and she could not speak; nor did she move when the gangway was put down and Flo rushed forward to greet her brother.

"Where's my mother?" was Richard's first question.

"She could not come," said Flo; "but here is Hylda."

Richard started, and seemed inclined to pass on without speaking; then holding out his hand, he touched his wife's for a moment and let it fall again.

"How soon can we get home?" he said, turning back to Flo. "Nothing will set me up like a blow of Yarmouth air."

"Oh, Richard, we are not going home," cried Flo, forgetting her dread of her brother's fragile appearance in her excitement. "Father will not have you, and he would not let mother say a word for you; but I came off in spite of him, for I was determined that Hylda should not come alone."



"I can't make out what you mean!" said Richard, staring at her with a bewildered look.

"I can't explain in this crowd; we must go to a hotel. Where is your luggage?"

Richard looked helplessly about him; he had so buoyed himself up with the thought of seeing his mother that the sudden blow was too much for him.

"I have the luggage, ma'am," said Tanner, coming forward. "Sir Tristram sent me over with Mr. Weston, and he gave me the name of a hotel, in case there should be no one to meet him."

He spoke to one of the porters, and while he and Flo secured the luggage, Richard stood, white and trembling, jostled by hurrying passengers, and struggling painfully for breath. Hylda watched him until she could bear it no longer, and going up to him, she drew his hand through her arm. She feared that he would repulse her, but on the contrary, he clung to her feebly, and allowed her to lead him a few steps out of the crowd.

She was thankful even for this, and when at last they reached the hotel and he was laid upon a sofa, she ventured to bend over him and press her lips to his forehead. He did not open his eyes, but at least he did not turn away from her, and Flo saw a look upon her face that brought tears to her own eyes.

Poor Flo was indeed in the depths of despair. The terrible thought stung her continually that but for her this tragedy might have been saved, and now that she saw her brother's state, she felt that her worst punishment had come. She escaped from the room as soon as she could, intending to go upstairs and have a good cry, but in the hall she met Tanner, and his first words startled her into calmness.

"Her ladyship is in the hotel, ma'am."

"Do you mean Lady Carlyle?" asked Flo.

"Yes, ma'am," said Tanner. "I thought you would like to know before I leave. Sir Tristram said I was to go on to London, if Mr. Weston had no further need of me."

"We can manage for him now, thank you," said Flo,

who had no idea, that the man was not Sir Tristram's valet. "If you will show me Lady Carlyle's room I will go and speak to her."

She had made the resolve boldly, but she felt some secret consternation when she arrived at the door. Lady Carlyle had 'just returned' from Normandy, and was resting at Dover for a night before going on to town. Nothing was further from her thoughts than that any of the "Weston people" should be in the vicinity, and when the door suddenly opened, and she saw the most detested of them all marching in upon her, she sprang to her feet in desperation.

Flo waited for no preliminaries; in a few telling words she painted the situation: her father's anger, her brother's condition, and Hylda's extremity; and, as she spoke, she noted with satisfaction the gradual softening of Lady Carlyle's warlike demeanour.

"I will come and see them," she said; and greatly as Flo feared the effect upon Richard, she dared not refuse.

Lady Carlyle sat long in her room that evening before she retired to rest; she could still see Richard's wasted frame and hear his labouring breath, but it was Hylda who held the foremost place in her mind. The affection that had grown up in her heart for her niece surprised no one so much as herself; she did not attempt to explain it, she only knew that she would give anything if only she might help her through the troubles against which she was battling so bravely.

But this privilege could not be hers; Hylda's refusal to come to the Court had opened her eyes to the real cause of Richard's treatment of her, and no risk must be run of reviving his resentment. It was Hylda's mother who must come to the front now, and though Lady Carlyle felt that Cecilia did not deserve such a chance of repentance, her sense of justice forbade her to withhold it.

She sat down to write her letter at once, and unwonted tears blurred her vision as she described her conversation with her niece. Hylda remembered nothing now of her husband's unkindness; all she wanted was to be allowed to use her time, her strength, and her money, in nursing

and tending him. But two hundred a-year does not go far in providing for an invalid when every household expense has first to be paid out of it; Beryl Villa had been shut up all the summer, and it would be a long business to make it ready for habitation. Obviously the best thing to be done was to take Richard to the Manor, and having told Cecilia to send an answer to London, Lady Carlyle conveyed the party next day to Tristram's town house.

When Hylda heard what had been done, she silenced her exclamation of relief with the reflection that Richard would never consent, but, contrary to her fears, he said nothing when Mrs. Carlyle's invitation arrived, and seemed content to lie still and let others arrange his plans for him.

Flo's composure fairly gave way when she said good-bye to the party at the station, and Lady Carlyle felt a stirring of sympathy as she saw her distress.

"Good-bye, Miss Weston," she said in her majestic way, "I believe I have done you injustice in the past."

"Don't mention it," said Flo warmly, "I feel just the same about you!"

The first smile that had been seen on Richard's sunken features gleamed out faintly as he heard, and before Lady Carlyle had had time to recover her breath the train moved off.

The thoughts of their arrival had kept Mrs. Carlyle awake all through the previous night; it was very awkward to meet Hylda again after such a parting as theirs had been, but it was still more awkward to know what to say to Richard. She need not have feared, however, for when she came trembling into the hall at the sound of the carriage wheels, it was to find a scene of sad confusion; Richard had fainted during the drive, and it was not till he had been carried upstairs and the doctor had been fetched, that there was time for any word to pass between the mother and daughter.

By that time no word was needed. The doctor's opinion had been of the gravest, and every minor feeling was swallowed up and forgotten in the one absorbing thought.

The September days came and passed, and everyone

knew that Richard would never leave his bed again; he lay quietly for hours between his painful battles for breath, his eyes resting upon his wife. Mrs. Carlyle had engaged trained nurses, but he was never happy unless Hylda was near him.

"It is the two I treated worst who have taught me what love is," he said more than once; and when Tristram paid a flying visit to the Court, he insisted on seeing him that he might ask for pardon with his own lips:

But all his hours were not so peaceful as this. The thought of his ruined career never seemed to trouble him; his ambitions and aspirations had faded away as completely as though they had never existed; but the memory of the love that he had thrown away had power to torture his exhausted brain.

"Now that I have learned how to value you I have to leave you," he said, with an anguish in his tone that brought the tears to Hylda's eyes.

Yet even this at last ceased to wound him; the sense of forgiveness outweighed the remorse, and though his father's obduracy grieved him, he never spoke of him otherwise than lovingly. He knew that his sun was going down, and there was no place in his heart for wrath.

"Do you know what next Wednesday is?" he asked one day.

Hylda bowed her head silently; far from dwelling on the date as she had done last year, she had striven to put it out of her mind; it was Richard now who recurred to it again and again with strange pertinacity.

She hoped that he would forget it as the day drew near, and on the morning before she was relieved to find that a new idea had taken possession of his mind.

"I want to see my people," he said, "they will come if you tell them it is the last time. Say they must all come, and poor old Ralph too."

He was restless and eager until he saw Hylda sit down to write, and then he turned his head on the pillow and fell peacefully asleep.

They came the next day—a silent, awe-stricken group, each one of whom carried a separate remorse within their

breasts. One by one they came to Richard's side with tears and words of love, but he lay quiet and almost unheeding.

When midnight came, however, a change passed over him, and he raised himself suddenly.

"Hylda is waiting for me," he said in a loud clear voice, "I must go to her study."

He flung their detaining hands aside with ever-increasing impatience, and at last in despair Ralph and Jo wrapped him in a blanket, and carried him to the room where a fire had been lighted for the convenience of the watchers.

He looked round with a sigh of pleasure as he was laid on the sofa, and Hylda knelt down by his side and took his head upon her shoulder.

All was silent for a time, while the lamplight fell upon the strangely-assorted group; Lady Carlyle and her sister-in-law sat with clasped hands, for once in their lives completely at one; Mrs. Weston was sobbing uncontrollably, while her husband's harsh features worked with emotion; Jo and Flo stood together trembling and awed by the scene, and Ellen, her eyes full of tears, looked at Ralph's sorrowful countenance, but did not dare to approach him in her father's presence.

Suddenly Richard opened his eyes with his old piercing look,

"Do you forgive me, father?" he said.

The old man could not speak, but he took his son's hand and kissed it passionately.

Richard looked across at Ralph, and his friend came to his side.

"Give me your hand," he said, and beckoning Ellen to him he guided Ralph's hand to hers and joined them both with his father's.

"That is all," he said.

Flo looked up half indignantly; had he forgotten Hylda? But she need not have feared; he moved his head a little, and met his wife's eyes with a smile: there was no need of forgiveness between Hylda and himself.

"The river is rising," he exclaimed; "I hear the water."

The listeners in the room could hear nothing except his

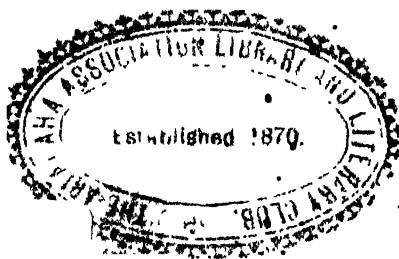
labouring breath, but Richard looked eagerly towards the window with a light in his eyes.

"I hear the water;" he said again, "and the splash of the oars."

Hylda did indeed fancy that she could hear the water rushing, and see the boat that had come to her aid; but she knew that it was no earthly stream that was rising round them now, and recalling herself with an effort, she began to repeat the lines that had been often on her lips during the past weeks :

•  
" Though from out our bourne of Time and space  
The tide may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
• When I have crost the bar."

There was a shiver of the hand she held, a droop of the head she supported, and the shadowy Boatman who comes for each and all in-turn, ferried another traveller over the waters of Death.



## CHAPTER XXV.

THE sun was pouring down its waves of heat through the still Christmas air, and men and beasts alike looked weary and listless under its rays. All the leisured inhabitants of Melbourne who had any energy left had gone out to Brighton or St. Kilda in the hope of obtaining a sea breeze, while the remainder wandered aimlessly in the public parks and gardens.

There were a few bold spirits, however, who had cast in their lot neither with the one class nor the other, and of these was Sir Tristram Carlyle, who was walking up Elizabeth Street as briskly as though the December day was an English and not an Australian one. His face was bronzed, and his step was firm and vigorous; he had had his fill of travel and adventure at last, and his looks showed that the treatment had been just what he needed.

As he reached the junction with Bourke Street, he came in sight of the post office, and paused a moment after the usual fashion of strangers to admire the building.

"We might learn a thing or two from our colonies," he thought, as he looked at the open colonnades with their easy flights of steps, and the lettered windows where people can receive their papers and packets under their initials.

"There's an energetic being!" he added half-aloud, as a white-coated individual hurried up the steps with a haste that seemed altogether out of keeping with the heat.

He started as the words crossed his lips, for there was something about the figure that struck him as familiar.

"It can't by any possibility be Dudley-Hartnell," he

said to himself, "and yet as sure as I live he's taken up his stand under the letter H."

He bounded up the steps with all speed, and at that moment the well-laden recipient turned away from the window, and revealed the well-known features of the editor of the *Monthly Review*.

"Carlyle, by all that's wonderful!" he exclaimed, and the two men clasped hands with mutual delight and astonishment.

"Where are you staying?" asked Tristram, when the first hurried questions had been asked and answered.

"At the Port Philip Hotel. But I am only here for a few days. I came out entirely for the sake of the voyage, and I am going back again directly."

"I am only here for a few days also," said Tristram, "but I am going on to New Zealand."

"How long have you been abroad?"

"Nearly three years."

"Nearly three years! I had no idea it was so long; time slips away at such a pace. What have you been doing?"

"Egypt and Africa first, then India, China and Japan; six months of roughing it here, and now I am going to New Zealand and home by Honolulu, 'Frisco and New York, spending some time in the States on the way."

"Yes, yes," said the other; "but I did not ask where you had been, but what you had been doing. A man may waste time in travelling as much as in any other way."

"Well, I hope I have not wasted my time," said Tristram with a smile. "Don't you think that a journey over the world will help me to do better work in Parliament?"

"So you mean to stand for election again," said the editor with a mollified air. "I am glad to hear it, for to tell you the truth, I thought you were running away from your responsibilities. However, we won't talk of that now. Will you come back with me, or have you any engagement?"

"None," said Tristram; "I have not sought anyone out, as I am only here for a few days."

"Then we will spend to-morrow together; it is good to see a face from home on Christmas Day."



The two men talked much that night and again the next day, but they did not touch on any confidential point, and it was not till they had set out for a stroll on Christmas afternoon, and were standing on Princes Bridge to admire the view of the river, that Tristram alluded to their previous conversation.

"So you thought I was shirking?" he said, as he leaned over the parapet and looked into the water.

"I did not say shirking," replied the editor.

"You implied it," said Tristram.

"I am sorry if I have hurt your feelings, Carlyle. I daresay I misjudged you, but I am an old friend and you must forgive me."

He looked anxiously at his companion as he spoke, but there was no answer.

"Look there," said Tristram at last, pointing down along the lower reaches of the river, "do you see that craft brought up for repair? Masts gone, sails gone, and a hole in her side; what would have been her fate if she had put to sea again like that?"

"I don't understand you," said Mr. Dudley-Hartnell.

"Then I will tell you, though I never thought to tell any human being. You do not know that I was to have been married to my cousin, but you do know that she married Richard Weston. I wish I could feel that no other man would ever endure such torture as I have done; the agony I had to hide, the temptations I had to fight, the love I had to try and kill — "; he stopped, and his face turned white at the remembrance.

"I pulled myself together somehow," he began again after a pause; "I went into Parliament as a soldier might have rushed into action, to drown my thoughts; I worked at full strain night and day, I would not let myself give in. Then came that affair at the gambling club; I should have been thankful if that blow on the head had finished me, but it was not to be, and I dragged myself up again, and went in search of him that I might bring him back to her. Oh, my God, what I have endured, and not one drop of water to cool my burning tongue!"

Mr. Dudley-Hartnell listened in silent consternation; it









